

FAITH OF THEIR FATHERS:
CREATIVITY AND AUTHENTICITY FROM MEDIEVAL
ICELANDIC SAGAS TO THE MODERN NOVEL

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Critical Reflection: Creativity and Authenticity from Medieval Icelandic Sagas to the Modern Novel.

Introduction

Saxo Grammaticus, the thirteenth century Danish chronicler, when writing his prologue to the *Gesta Danorum* (History of Denmark) took the time to specifically cite Icelandic narrators as reliable sources for his great work. He expounded the opinion that Icelanders, while materially poor, were intellectually gifted and had a peculiar penchant for the collection and dissemination of history:

They regard it as a real pleasure to discover and commemorate the achievements of every nation; in their judgement it is as elevating to discourse on the on the prowess of others as to display their own. Thus I have scrutinised their store of historical treasures and composed a considerable part of this present work by copying their narratives, not scorning, where I recognised such skill in ancient lore, to take these men as witnesses.¹

Perhaps Saxo is referring to the oral practitioners of skaldic verse, or skalds, who by this point had ingratiated themselves in courts across Scandinavia as chroniclers and authorities on history. That a distinguished and learned Latin scholar did not see it beneath himself to utilise these pre-literate sources indicates the respect he held for the medieval Icelander's authenticity and dedication to craft. This respect for Icelandic historiography is also found in the prologue to Theodoricus Monachus' *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*. Theodoricus explains that his knowledge is gleaned from "years [...] of the most diligent inquiries I could among those whom we in our language call Icelanders. It is well known that they without doubt have always been more knowledgeable and more inquisitive in matters of this kind than all other northern peoples."²

¹ Saxo Grammaticus, *The History of the Danes*, trans. Peter Fisher, ed. Hilda Ellis Davidson (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer and Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), p. 5.

² Theodoricus Monachus, *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, trans. David and Ian McDougal (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), p. 5.

Faith of their Fathers has followed in the tradition of Saxo and Theodoricus, utilising the medieval Old Norse-Icelandic texts collectively known as the sagas in the composition of a new narrative. The following critical analysis will reflect upon these medieval texts and their influences on the composition of the novel. First, it is appropriate to define what exactly a saga is before we can examine their influences upon the novel. The term “saga” is an Icelandic noun derived from a verb: *segja*, “to tell” or “to speak.” As Phelpstead succinctly explains, “‘saga’ thus means ‘something said’ or more narrowly ‘a story, a narrative’ (the modern Icelandic plural of saga is sögur)”.³ Phelpstead continues to explain that while all sagas concern themselves with historical events, the extent to which they can be relied upon as historiographical treatises is up for debate. There are many different types of saga and they are typically classified by modern academia according to their subject matter. The *konungasögur*⁴ (kings’ sagas), for example, are typically associated with history of the kings of Norway while the *biskupa sögur*⁵ (bishops’ sagas) focus upon recounting the lives and theological importance of Icelandic bishops. Non-Icelandic saints are traditionally grouped into *heilagra manna sögur*⁶ (saint’s sagas) while the *riddarasögur*⁷ (romance sagas) are defined by their seeming continental influences: many are translations predicated on original French texts and yet others are original compositions that mimic the style and substance of the romance tales. The *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas)⁸ are set in ancient times and typically recount the almost mythological history of mainland Scandinavia and sit in almost direct opposition to the *samtíðarsögur* (contemporary sagas)⁹ which focus upon much more recent (to the compilers) history of Iceland and provide valuable insight into the nature of Icelandic and Norwegian politics during the thirteenth century. Whilst *Faith of their*

³ Carl Phelpstead, *An Introduction to the Sagas of the Icelanders*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020), p. 6-7.

⁴ Ármann Jakobsson, “Royal Biography” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 388-402.

⁵ Margaret Cormack, “Christian Biography” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 27-42.

⁶ Kevin J. Wanner, “Byskupasögur and heilagra manna sögur – A Case Study” in *A Critical Companion to Old Norse Literary Genre*, eds. Massimiliano Bampi, Carolyne Larrington and Sif Rikhardsdottir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 283-298.

⁷ Geraldine Barnes, *The Bookish Riddarasögur: Writing Romance in Late Mediaeval Iceland* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2014).

⁸ Torfi H. Tulinius, “Sagas of Icelandic Prehistory” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, eds. By Rory McTurk, (Oxford Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 447-461.

⁹ Úlfar Bragason, “Sagas of Contemporary History” in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 427-446.

Fathers does draw upon characteristics found within the above saga types, it is primarily influenced by the *konungasögur* about medieval kings of Norway and the *Íslendinga sögur* (Sagas of Icelanders or Family Sagas) which concern themselves with events in Iceland from the beginning of the Norse settlement in the 870s until around 1030.

The nature of saga composition and transmission complicates our understanding of authorship within the sagas. This must first be understood before we can ascribe any creative intent to the “authors” themselves. The sagas used over the course of this thesis are translations of modern editions based on various extant manuscripts. These manuscripts are themselves copies of originals lost to time. The products of multiple contributors (authors, scribes, compilers and editors), these texts rarely contain immutable narratives. Equally, the medieval concept of authorship is different to the positivistic definition of current scholarship. Alastair Minnis, when analysing the *auctor* and *auctoritas* of Latin texts explains that the concept of medieval authorship was “not homogeneous in the sense of being uncomplicated and narrowly monolithic: there was a rich abundance of kinds, degrees, properties and aspects of authorship to describe and relate to not one but several systems of classification.”¹⁰ How then, should one determine the authorship of the *Íslendinga sögur* and *konungasögur*? Gísli Sigurðsson stresses that the act of writing is not necessarily the creative moment in regard to Old Norse poetry and prose. Instead, he argues for more emphasis to be placed upon the preceding oral composers whose works inspired, and are cited within, the written sagas.¹¹ Gísli warns against identifying authorship with its modern conceptions. Sverrir Tómasson, unlike Gísli, contends that the role of the writer should not be excluded from the concept of authorship, even when accounting for skaldic antecedents that inspired the composition of the saga. Sverrir argues that the act of adapting the skaldic verse into the prosimetric saga form is itself an act of creative authorship.

¹⁰ Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 2.

¹¹ Gísli Sigurðsson, “Poet, Singer of Tales, Storyteller, and Author” in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, eds. Slavica Ranković, Ingvil Brügger Budal, , Aidan Conti, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), pp. 227-235.

Moreover, Sverrir believes that the saga writers were “well aware of their creative and important role in society.”¹²

Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen argues that a concept of “distributed authorship” be applied to the saga authors and Old Norse-Icelandic manuscripts in general.¹³ He believes that the translators, scribes and editors of the manuscripts formed a cultural gestalt that generated a series of themes, motifs and phrases found throughout the extant literature. As a case study, he compares two eddic poems: *The Lay of Prymr* and *Skírnir’s Journey*. Whilst these are not sagas, from them he extrapolates his central theory: He identifies key stereotyped phrases and motifs that are present in multiple manuscripts across different genres and argues this is because of a shared compositional “tradition” created through the process of transliterating oral sources into their written forms.¹⁴

Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir equally advocates for this concept of distributed authorship and does so by analysing a manuscript called *Reynistaðarbók* (AM 764 4to). In her analysis of the first thirty-three folio pages Svanhildur identifies no fewer than ten scribes, and potentially as many authors, who contributed to the composition of the manuscript. Of particular note is the appearance of the Old Norse word *vér*: this is the first-person plural and seems to indicate that the manuscript compilers wished to be identified as a collective.¹⁵ Authorship of the sagas is thus an imprecise concept and may not be directly applicable to a single agent, even when a named author is posited. Consider *Njals Saga*, a thirteenth century *Íslendinga sögur* that explores the consequences of vengeance and blood feuds in Iceland. Numerous people have been suggested as its author including Snorri Sturluson, Sæmundr fróði and Jón Loftsson, none conclusively. The surviving manuscripts are not the original

¹² Sverrir Tómasson, “Höfundr–Skáld: Author, Compiler, and Scribe in Old Norse Literature” in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, eds. Slavica Ranković, Ingvil Brügger Budal, Aidan Conti, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), pp. 236-250, p. 250.

¹³ Bernt Øyvind Thorvaldsen, “The Eddic Author: On Distributed Creativity in The Lay of Prymr and Skírnir’s Journey” in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, eds. Slavica Ranković, Ingvil Brügger Budal, , Aidan Conti, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), pp. 251-264, p. 251.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

¹⁵ Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, “The Resourceful Scribe: Some Aspects of the Development of Reynistaðarbók (AM 764 4to)” in *Modes of Authorship in the Middle Ages*, eds. Slavica Ranković, Ingvil Brügger Budal, Aidan Conti, Leidulf Melve, and Else Mundal (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), pp. 325-342.

and are in fact the work of several scribes and editors.¹⁶ Despite this, there remain remarkable consistencies in the style, themes and motifs found throughout saga literature including a passion for history writing.

As will be discussed in the following chapters, the genre boundaries between the *Íslendinga sögur* and *konungasögur* are not clear, and neither is the medieval concept of “fact” or “fiction”. It is my contention that this is one of many facets of saga literature that is due to the distributed authorship of the sagas. With this in mind, we should further explore the notion of “fiction” in relation to the expectations of the medieval audience and how this may have informed the saga compilers.

To label a narrative as fictional in the quasi-generic sense understood by modern literary critics and scholars there exists the assumption of “an unwritten contract between author and audience, by which the author tells a licensed form of ‘lie’ with no intention to deceive and the audience accepts it as such.”¹⁷ Were the saga authors engaging in this “unwritten contract” and are the sagas knowingly fictitious tales that showcase the creative and editorial decisions of the distributed authorship? Thomas Mallon, author of *Aurora 7*, a historical novel set in 1962 against the backdrop of Astronaut Scott Carpenter's fateful triple orbit around the earth, has written at length regarding the art of historical fiction in relation to his work. He ruminates on the allure of historical fiction to readers:

I think that readers always liked historical fiction, not because they wanted to drag history into the present and make it useful, but because they wanted to put themselves back into history, into the past, to wander around it as if in a dream, to ponder themselves as having been born too late.¹⁸

A similar motive can be attributed to medieval Icelanders. They were renowned for their historical knowledge which was matched only by their perceived story telling prowess. When the Norwegian King Sverrir, who ruled from 1184 to 1202, wanted a biography composed he turned to the Icelandic abbot Karl Jónsson from the monastery of Þingeyrar.¹⁹ Two generations later, King Magnús

¹⁶ *Njals Saga*, trans. Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998).

¹⁷ Ralph O'Connor, “History or fiction? Truth-claims and defensive narrators in Icelandic romance-sagas” in *Mediaeval Scandinavia*, 15 (2005), 101-169, p. 110.

¹⁸ Thomas Mallon, “Writing Historical Fiction” in *The American Scholar*, 61, No.4 (1992), 604-610, p. 610.

¹⁹ *The Saga of King Sverri of Norway (Sverrisaga)*, Trans. J. Stephen (Felinfach: Llanerch Press; 1994), p. 1.

Lawmender would also employ an Icelander to write his biography: Sturla Þórðarson.²⁰ Sturla's uncle, Snorri, is the suggested composer of *Heimskringla*²¹, an exemplar of the Norwegian kings' sagas that forms the basis of accounts even to this day and, as will be discussed in the following chapters, heavily informed the narrative of *Faith of their Fathers*. As Preben Meulengracht Sørensen argues, "Icelanders were professionals, a kind of literary Swiss guard, which was called upon when it became necessary to relate history in poetry or in writing".²²

Saga authors, who are anonymous in the *Íslendinga sögur* and *fornaldarsögur* but occasionally named in the *konungasögur*, show remarkable consistency in the composition of their narratives across the gamut of saga genres, be they *Íslendinga sögur*, *fornaldarsögur* or *konungasögur*. Kurt Schier, writing in *Iceland and the Rise of Literature in 'terra nova'* is of the opinion that the historical self-consciousness of Icelanders is due to their "awareness of standing at a beginning, of having created something entirely new."²³ This implies that there was a shared understanding of what a saga *was*, and creative self-awareness on behalf of the authors when composing their narratives. With these caveats in mind, the following chapters will further examine the genre and fictional aspects of saga literature, elucidating on their impact upon the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*.

²⁰ *Hákonar saga I-II*, ed. by Sverrir Jakobsson, Þorleifur Hauksson, Tor Ulset, Íslensk fornrit XXXI-XXXII (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2013).

²¹ For information on the debate surrounding Snorri as the composer of *Heimskringla* and the intended audience, see my later chapter "Fact in Fiction: The Sources in Faith of their Fathers".

²² P.M. Sørensen, "Social Institutions and Belief Systems of Medieval Iceland (c.870-1400) and their Relations to Literary Production" In *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 8-29, p. 13.

²³ Kurt Schier, "Iceland and the Rise of Literature in 'Terra Nova': Some Comparative Reflections" in *Gripla*, 1 (1975), 168-181, p. 180.

Chapter I

Genre and Structure

Aristotle, writing in his *Poetics* on the delineation of tragedy, poetry and comedy, argues that “they can be differentiated from each other in three respects: in respect of their different media of imitation, or different objects, or a different mode (i.e. a different manner).”¹ This statement implies a central tenet of genre theory: that an individual work can be codified and understood by its component parts in relation to a wider canon. Consider the words of Tomashevski:

The characteristics of genre, that is to say the procedures which organise its composition of the text, are dominating procedures, i.e., all other procedures necessary to the creation of the artistic ensemble are subordinate to them [...] That ensemble of dominate procedures constitutes the element that permits the formation of genre.²

The importance of genre, and its value as a deterministic tool, is an ongoing debate that has been succinctly summarised by Carl Phelpstead. He draws attention to two different modes of critically engaging with the concept of genre: nominalism and realism.³

Nominalism, in essence, is the notion that genre is an external classification imposed on texts, not something implicit to the text itself. Benedetto Croce speaking on the “empirical sense of the divisions of the classes”, states that broad genre classifications such as comedy, tragedy, romances etc. should not be used to establish “laws and definitions” but instead only be conceived as a means of drawing attention “in general and approximately to certain groups of works”.⁴

Adena Rosmarin, another nominalist, cautions against the paradox of genre classification as a means of identifying what is similar between texts or what has been repeated. Rosmarin states that “we name something a “repetition” when it reminds us of something else so strongly that it seems to be that something else, to be not itself but a repetition of a prior self.”⁵ We negate the originality or

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcom Heath (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 3.

² B. Tomashevski, “Thématique” in *Théorie de la Littérature*, (Paris: Seuil, 1965), p. 303.

³ Carl Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints’ Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings’ Sagas* (Arizona: Arizona State University, 2007), p. 39.

⁴ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*. Trans. Douglas Ainslie (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 38.

⁵ Adena Rosmarin, *The Power of Genre*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 24.

versatility of any given text if we only define it by its seeming repetition of previous themes, motifs, or structures.

Realism, by contrast, is defined by its attempt to recognise the “‘real’ nature of the text.”⁶ Genres are thus conceived as a “set of conventions that help determine what a writer writes and enable a reader to orientate her- or himself in relation to a text.”⁷ It recognises the importance of this classification to the writer and encourages an awareness of the author’s own understanding of genre. There is, however, a paradox inherent to this model. If a genre can only be understood by grouping together texts that seem to share common components, how should the texts be selected, that will be used in the formation of its classification?

In short, both “nominalists” and “realists” recognise that genre should only be seen as the “beginning of understanding.”⁸ How then, should one begin to understand *Faith of Fathers* and what are the textual, and thus genre, influences upon its composition?

This chapter will examine a specific dominant procedure utilised in the construction of the *Íslendinga sögur* form, its narrative structure, as defined by Theodore M. Andersson and later commentators, and highlight how their various frameworks informed the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*. Equally, it will explore how aspects of the modern thriller’s “combination of mystery, in the form of a criminal conspiracy, and competitive individualism”⁹ were also incorporated into the text. It will show how these seemingly disparate analytical frameworks were mapped onto each other, allowing for the creation of *Faith of their Fathers* a hybrid text that incorporates aspects of both saga literature and the modern thriller. It is the belief of this author that the nature of a thriller, with its necessary components of conspiracy and ever-increasing climaxes, maps convincingly onto elements of the structural schemas proposed by saga commentators.

⁶ Phelpstead, *Holy Vikings: Saints’ Lives in the Old Icelandic Kings’ Sagas*, p. 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41, alluding to Hayden White

⁹ Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*, (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978), p. 144.

First, a further elaboration upon the sagas is necessary before we can further define their dominant characteristics. As was explained in the introduction, there are several different types of saga: The *konungasögur*, *biskupa sögur*, *heilagra manna*, *riddarasögur* and the *fornaldarsögur*. It is important to note that the majority of the classifications above are modern constructs assigned to the sagas as part of critical discourse. While the terms *riddarasögur* and *konungasögur* are evidenced in Old Norse manuscripts from the Middle Ages¹⁰ other terms such as *Íslendinga sögur* and *fornaldarsögur* appear only later as part of critical discourse.¹¹ Objections have been raised in critical discourse regarding the rigidity of this taxonomy. It does not, for example, provide for sagas that exhibit characteristics of multiple genre classifications. Consider Marianne E. Kalinke's bridal-quest sub-genre of *riddarasögur*, which indicates themes and styles were shared across continental and genre influences.¹²

Massimiliano Bampi urges caution with identifying these models as mere instruments of classificatory convenience, however. He argues that while the defining and assigning of a genre classification does influence how scholars and readers will approach and interpret these artistic works there are other considerations. Bampi contends that genre is “central to our understanding not only of how Icelanders constructed their own world views and relation to the past through the medium of literature, but also how changes in political, social, and economic structures permeated the literary system, influencing their use of different modes of narration to discuss topical issues or express hopes and preoccupations.”¹³ These genre boundaries are complicated by the fact that each saga, be it an *Íslendinga saga*, *fornaldarsaga* or other, is not just the work of a single, often nameless, author. They do not “have single fixed identities but are constituted through a complex process of oral and literary creation, re-creation, and conservation.”¹⁴ The extant versions of these sagas have been compiled,

¹⁰ There is some manuscript evidence, however, that suggests medieval Icelanders were cognisant of generic distinctions. On genre and codicological evidence, see Stephen A. Mitchell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) pp. 21–22.

¹¹ The term *fornaldarsögur* was coined, for example, by Carl Christian Rafn in *Fornaldar sögur Nordrlanda*, an early nineteenth-century work that collated sagas narrating events that preceded the settlement of Iceland in 870.

¹² Marianne E. Kalinke, *Bridal-Quest Romance in Medieval Iceland*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹³ Massimiliano Bampi, ‘Genre’, in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, ed. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London and New York, 2015), pp. 4–14, pp. 4–7.

¹⁴ Phelpstead, *An Introduction to the Sagas of Icelanders*, p. 13.

transcribed, and rewritten numerous times across different manuscripts. In fact, as least regarding the *Íslendinga sögur*, the original copies are lost, and can only be inferred through the study of manuscript genealogy. However, throughout this process of revision and interpretation the *structure* of the sagas remains remarkably robust.

Consider *Njáls saga*, considered to be “greatest and most celebrated of all Icelandic sagas”¹⁵, which was written during the late thirteenth century and has survived to the present day in several manuscripts including: *Reykjabók* (AM 468 4to), *Þormóðsbók* (AM 162 B δ fol.), *Gráskinna* (GKS 2870 4to), *Kálfalækjarbók* (AM 133 fol.), *Möðruvallabók* (AM 132 fol.). None of these extant manuscripts contain a complete edition of the saga nor do these represent an “original”. Einar Ólafur Sveinsson attempted to trace the genealogy of these manuscripts, dividing them in three unique branches: X, Y, and Z with Y and Z descending from a hypothesized lost manuscript *V. Finally, he concluded that *V was in fact a sister manuscript to *A, the archetype of the X-branch.¹⁶

Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Emily Lethbridge have done an impressive job in codifying and highlighting the issues of textual transmission between these original manuscripts and later editors and translators. Utilising the 1875 scholarly edition, composed by Eiríkur Jónsson and Konráð Gíslason, which was based on all extant parchments of *Njáls saga*, Svanhildur and Lethbridge argue that there are many problematic differences between the manuscripts utilised by scholars, not least of which is the fact there exists considerable variation in the number of verses included within them.¹⁷ Despite this, they *still* conclude that:

A reader perusing the critical apparatus of the 1875 edition will ultimately discover that there is no variation in the plot or the sequence of events. He or she may also admire how stable in the textual transmission many famous sentences uttered by the characters are.¹⁸

¹⁵ Thorsteinn Gylfason, *Njáls Saga*, trans. Carl F. Bayerschmidt and Lee M. Hollander, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1998) p. xi.

¹⁶Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Formáli.” In *Brennu-Njáls saga*, (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1954) pp. v–clxiii, p. cxlix.

¹⁷ Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Emily Lethbridge, “Whose Njála? Njáls saga Editions and Textual Variance in the Oldest Manuscripts” in *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls Saga*, eds. Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir and Emily Lethbridge, (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018) pp. 1-28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 9.

Even with all the issues regarding transmission vectors for this narrative, the general plot and structure of the saga remained relatively consistent.

Some structural deviation *is* to be expected, however. Consider *Partalopa saga* which, according to Marianne E. Kalinke and P.M. Mitchel, is “either a thirteenth-century translation from a lost version of the French *Partenopeus de Blois*, or an Icelandic reworking of a lost Norwegian translation.”¹⁹ It is a *riddarasögur* and the story centres on Partonopeu, nephew of the French king, who becomes lost and is brought to a magical kingdom where the citizens are invisible. Here he meets the Melior/Empress of Constantinople who has chosen him as her future husband, but due to his young age, they will have to wait two and a half years before they can be united publicly in marriage.²⁰

According to Sif Rikhardsdottir there is evidence to suggest that the order of events within the Icelandic translation is altered from the French:

In the Old Norse version of the romance the narrative order has been changed (or the version the Icelandic text is based on had an alternative narrative order) and the romance therefore begins with Melior, the empress, who, as in the French story, has Partonopeu transported to her kingdom to share her bed at night.²¹

Whilst this deviation in structure highlights the dangers in relying upon structure not altering *at all* from original composition to now, it is worth highlighting that this structural change only serves to change the focus of the narrative and alter the readers sympathies: the character of Melior/Empress is cast in a new light. This is not the only revision, however, for in the Old Norse version, Melior has no intention of marrying Partonopeu:

[...]she did not want any man to be more powerful than her if she had her way and she realized that whoever received her hand in marriage would become Emperor over all of Greece and would become more powerful than she and she thought it would be a great disgrace to be entitled ‘Empress’ when before she was entitled ‘maiden king’ over Partonope and many other chieftains.²²

¹⁹ Marianne E. Kalinke and P. M. Mitchell, *Bibliography of Old Norse–Icelandic Romances*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 90.

²⁰ *Partalopa saga*, ed. by Lise Præstgaard Andersen (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels forlag, 1983).

²¹ Sif Rikhardsdottir, “The Phantom of a Romance: Traces of Romance Transmission and the Question of Originality” in *Medieval Romances Across European Borders* eds. Miriam Edlich-Muth (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2018) pp. 133-151, p. 145.

²² Sif Rikhardsdottir, “The Phantom of a Romance: Traces of Romance Transmission and the Question of Originality”, p. 144.

Sif Rikhardsdottir uses this, in combination with the change in the narrative order of events, to argue that the medieval Icelandic translator made these alterations to only change the relative positions of characters within the narrative. The bulk of the narrative structure remains, seemingly, intact.²³

If aspects of saga genre are mutable across manuscripts, translations and critical editions, then selecting the *least* mutable for emulation hopefully ensures that an aspect of saga literature as a whole has been codified into the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*. It is for this reason that structure was chosen as the dominant characteristic to be emulated in *Faith of their Fathers* as it could be argued to be the most reliably preserved aspect of the original compositions that created an “identifiable art form that has roots far deeper than the inventiveness of the individual.”²⁴

Within the *Íslendinga sögur*, what are some of the possible narrative structures that have been proposed? Vladimir Propp, in his work *Morphology of the Folktale*, wrote a seminal, and oft-quoted, treatise on the form and structure of folktales. He identifies thirty-one functions and argues that they must follow in a fixed sequence (although he allows for additions and subtractions) towards the removal of a “lack” or a “villainy”.²⁵ Propp’s principles informed the specific analysis of the Icelandic saga form by Theodore M. Andersson in his text *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading*. Andersson was one of the first to attempt to codify the structural elements of the saga form, and his analysis, along with counter-commentators, helped guide the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*. He argues that the saga form arose from the legacy of heroic German epic:

In view of the evidence it seems more fruitful to regard the literary form of the saga as an adaptation of heroic models rather than as history, as an older generation held, or as a novelistic innovation, as a new generation believes. The narrative material may be historical, or at least traditional, and some of the techniques are unprecedented, but the author’s mode of thought and many of his stylistic habits are certainly heroic.²⁶

To this end, Andersson created his own schema that he believed could be ascribed to the *Íslendinga sögur* introduction, conflict, climax, revenge, reconciliation and aftermath. To do this, he took Propp’s

²³ Ibid. pp. 144-145.

²⁴ Jesse Byock, *Feud in Icelandic Saga* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 25

²⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 22-23.

²⁶ Theodore M. Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Saga: An Analytic Reading* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 93.

formula and adapted it. Rather than a series of sequential progressions set off by acts of villainy or a lack on behalf of the hero, Andersson argues that saga form revolved around a series of epic “tales”. Each tale built upon another eventually leading to a dramatic climax. He describes the plot as pyramidal in structure, with a slow crescendo towards the climax followed by a diminuendo towards rest or balance: “in simplest terms the saga is the story of dramatic climax, which everything else is calculated to put into relief.”²⁷

Anderson cites a *þáttr* (short story) called *Þorsteins Þáttr stangarhöggs* (The tale of Thorstein Staff-Struck) in defence of his schema. Þættir are shorter narratives which “whether they occur separately or part of a larger work, give the appearance of being anecdotes that can perform a variety of functions, such as illustrating a king’s character or providing an authenticating historical or learned detail.”²⁸ His scheme argues that conflict *must* precede climax and that revenge must come after climax. The climax in this short story revolves around a duel between Þorsteinn and the chieftain Bjarni Brodd-Helgason of Hof. The protagonist, Þorsteinn, had killed a man called Thord as revenge for an earlier slight during a horse race and Bjarni sets out to seek restitution. In this instance, Thord is the stableman of chieftain Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, and this act of revenge serves as introduction to the chieftain. However, by utilising a *þáttr* as an example of his structural framework, Andersson inadvertently highlights that the elements he has identified as being *exclusive* to saga form can be found in *other* types of medieval Icelandic writings. Indeed, as Phelpstead argues: “[Andersson’s] pattern fits some sagas better than others and can on occasion distort the relative importance of episodes within a saga, sometimes overemphasising the climax event (and maintaining that there should be only one per saga). One might also ask whether this model is more than “a sophisticated way of saying that sagas of beginnings, middles, and ends.”²⁹

If *Faith of their Fathers* was to incorporate saga-specific structural elements then another framework would be needed. It was found in Jesse Byock’s *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*. Byock argues

²⁷ Ibid. p. 34.

²⁸ Robert Kellog, “Introduction” in *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, eds. Örnólfur Thorsson, (London: Penguin Books, 2001) pp. xv-lvii, pp. xx.

²⁹ Phelpstead, *The Sagas of Icelanders*, p. 61.

that “theories of fixed sequential order do little more than bring attention to gross patterns in the sagas, and the determination to find such an order has remained for years a stumbling block in the study of the saga’s narrative form.”³⁰ Like Andersson, Byock understood the importance of conflict and resolution within the sagas, or feud, but he proposes an adaptive framework that instead allows for more structural nuance.

Byock defined three distinct aspects of action, or narrative units, which he classifies as feudemes: Conflict, Advocacy, Resolution. Each feudeme exists independently of the others and can take place in any order within a saga. He draws a distinction between his feudemes which are “active” elements of the structure and information which he defines as “passive”:

If a person is killed, and a character within the saga learns of the action or only gets involved in a dispute only because someone informed him about the killing, such giving of information would be advocacy. Only a killing takes place “on the scene”, that is as an action, is it conflict or resolution, depending upon the circumstances.³¹

This schema provided a more fluid analysis that could be readily applied to the composition of a modern novel. *Faith of their Fathers* was thus structured using narrative units identified by Byock as feudemes.

The first feudeme, Conflict, is utilised throughout the novel. We have the first, and obvious conflict in the form of the Pagan vs Christian aspects of culture. By Byock’s definition, however, only if the action takes place on the scene would it constitute an active feudeme/narrative unit and most of the Christian antagonization is inferred throughout the text. It is not until the end, at the climax, that the religious tensions break out into open conflict. As such, the pivotal conflict feudeme moments within *Faith of their Fathers* would be the opening murder, the fights between Thangbrander and Arinbjorn’s forces, the sea battles with Olaf and finally the arguments that arise from tension, such as when Arinbjorn accuses the Lawspeaker of murder or tension between Freya and Njall. Conflict can be found within any narrative, however, and one could argue you cannot have a sufficiently

³⁰ Jesse Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982) p. 57.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 57.

interesting narrative *without* conflict, as such that alone would not constitute an adherence to saga structure. To this end, the other feudemes were incorporated into the text.

Advocacy, according to Byock, is ‘tied inexorably to the kind of society that produced the sagas, a society that thrived on the building and thriving of bonds of support to make up for a lack of governmental institutions.’³² We see it in *Egil’s saga* when the eponymous hero first encounters king Erik Bloodaxe and his queen, Gunnhild. Egil and his group are offered a place to stay by Atloy-Bard, one of the king’s favoured men, but the host initially lies about his available resources and refuses to offer food and drink. This lie becomes apparent when Bard’s patrons, the king and queen, make a surprise arrival. A feast is thrown and Egil, angered at the previous lack of supplies, insults Bard. Bard then concocts a plan with Queen Gunnhild to poison Egil, stating that he is being unduly disrespectful and disruptive. Thanks to the timely use of magic, Egil identifies the ruse and instead kills Bard. This killing sets off the feud that pits Egil against king Erik and his queen for the remainder of the text. In order to avoid the king’s wrath, a friend of Egil’s father, Thorir, offers to speak to the king on his behalf and successfully argues for clemency in return for financial compensation.³³

It occurs again, in a rather different manner, in an amusing segment within *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*. One of the primary characters is the respected farmer Hoskuld, he is routinely called upon by the people of Laxardal to help mediate disputes. His skills are so respected that he is called upon to advocate between the living and the dead: When a particularly unpleasant and difficult man, Hrapp, dies he commands that his body be buried in the house upright so that he may ‘keep a watchful eye over [his] home.’³⁴ Hrapp then continues to haunt the farm and kill his previous servants. Hrapp’s wife begs Hoskuld to help. He does so by disinterring Hrapp and burying him far

³² Ibid. p. 57.

³³ *Egil’s Saga*, trans. by Bernard Scudder in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) pp. 3-143, pp. 66-71.

³⁴ *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. by Keneva Kunz in *The Sagas of Icelanders* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001) pp. 270-421, p. 297.

away from sheep and man alike, greatly reducing the hauntings. Saga texts are full of moments when respected men act as ambassadors for others, resolving their feuds through negotiation or action.

In order to emulate this key aspect of saga literature, the two principle protagonists, Arinbjorn and Freya, encounter people who act as their advocates. Arinbjorn is aided by his friend and foster brother Sigvaldi, who routinely speaks on Arinbjorn's behalf to deescalate tensions. This is apparent when Arinbjorn recklessly insinuates the law speaker is the murderer. Were it not for Gudrid and Sigvaldi coming between them, the pair would likely have come to blows. Further to this, Arinbjorn seeks supernatural aid from the witch Bera, who offers council and insight throughout the text. He clings to her runic totem for protection from his enemies and it is not until he relinquishes it to Sigvaldi that he meets his end. When her husband, Njall, is to be brought before the Althing to be tried for crimes of homosexuality, Freya seeks the aid of Hallr and Gizurr, the Christian Chieftains. Gizurr becomes a literal advocate when he agrees to defend Njall and turn the trial into a discussion about faith.

This brings us to the last of Byock's feudemes: Resolution, when balance is once again restored to the Icelandic community. Whilst *Faith of their Fathers* is demonstrably not set within the modern day, its setting within the geological and physical parameters of Iceland is an integral aspect of the narrative. Tim Edensor, in his discussion of the imbrications of legal frameworks, national identities and everyday life discusses how the geographical space of a state can practically affect concepts of identity and law: "In a very practical sense, national identity is facilitated by the state's legislative framework, which delimits and regulates the practices in which people can partake, the spaces in which they are permitted to move, and in many other ways provides a framework for quotidian experience".³⁵ The frontier nature of medieval Icelandic life is intrinsic to the mood and setting of *Faith of their Fathers*. The medieval denizens of Iceland had no executive branch of government, and their judiciary, such as it was, was a system of arbitration involving the Althing, Lawspeaker and the *Grágás* (Grey Goose) Laws.

³⁵ Tim Edensor, "Crime scene: Landscape and the law of the land" In *Spanish Spaces: Landscape, Space and Place in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, eds. Ann Davies, (Liverpool University Press, 2012) pp. 82-100.

As such, Jesse Byock argues, Icelandic society only reacted against conduct that was destabilising in an economic, ethical, or political order.³⁶ Even Andersson, whose earlier schema proved unsuitable for emulation, argues for the importance of balance within saga literature:

One of the fundamental principles of the saga is that of balance. The narrative line of a saga is a progression from balance to imbalance (conflict and the outbreak of violence) back to balance. This is the principle governing the section on revenge, without which the story would be one-sided and the feeling of imbalance would persist.³⁷

To this end, the central revenge story within *Faith of their Fathers* set out to include an economic, ethical and political imbalance.

Killings occur frequently in *Faith of their Fathers*, be it the killing of Njall's thralls, battles on the sea or the sacrificial slaughter of the child prisoner by Olaf. The true danger, and societal threat, stems from the conspiracy to destabilise paganism and incite Christian rage. In *Grágás*, the Icelandic laws explain in detail the literal cost of homicide, but it also details lawful procedure. The following extract explains how a person is lawfully required to declare their killing of another:

the killer is to publish the killing as his work within the next twelve hours; but if he is on mountain or fjord then he must do it within twelve hours of returning. He is to go to the first house where he thinks his life is in no danger on that account and tell one or more men legally resident there and state it in this way: "There was an encounter between us," he is to state, and name the other man and say where it was. "I publish those wounds as my work and all the injury done to him; I publish wounds if wounds are the outcome and killing if killing is the out-come."³⁸

In this way, a potential killer could explain the circumstances of the killing and, if a jury of their neighbours found in their favour, could avoid outlawry. In *Faith of their Fathers* Kormac and his patron, Thangbrand, actively hide their involvement in the killing of Skjalti and his family. This deceit compounds the killing and acts as a narrative conspiracy in the modern sense, but also serves the purpose of including societal disruption, a key aspect of saga form as defined by Byock.

Skjalti and his family are killed and the motive, seemingly, is his Christian affiliation. The pagan chieftains are not overly concerned by the death of a Christian, until his death becomes a

³⁶ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga*, pp. 98-113.

³⁷ Andersson, *The Icelandic Family Sagas: An Analytical Reading*, p. 23.

³⁸ Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote, Richard Perkins, trans. *The Laws of Early Iceland: Gragas I* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1980) p. 46.

galvanising force for social upheaval. In keeping with the structure identified above, the narrative needs to come to rest when an equilibrium is once again established within the society. It is not enough that Arinbjorn simply kill Olaf in revenge. This would not solve the issues raised by his previous machinations. In order for this to happen, a second strand of the narrative had to be explored – hence the focus upon the secondary plot of Freya and her husband. Caught up, as it were, in the growing discord between the two camps, it is Freya’s intervention and call for help from Christians that help bring the narrative to its true climax. To maintain equilibrium and overcome the destabilising effect of the religious schism that threatened to sunder their society, the Icelanders adopt Christianity. Much as in the sagas, it is more important that the social cohesion of the collective is maintained. The manipulative orchestrations of Olaf are removed when he is felled by Arinbjorn but, ironically, it is not until Olaf’s conspiratorial aim is achieved does the final feudeme of Resolution find incorporation in the text.

Whilst Byock’s feudeme model proved useful in the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*, its focus on feud to the expense of all else overlooked various other aspects of saga literature. It was therefore necessary to seek out other structural frameworks. In his introduction to *Njáls Saga*, Lars Lönnroth theorises on the general composition of the saga and argues that any given tale can be broken down into two sequential “action patterns.”³⁹ Much like Byock, he identifies the concept of feud as being essential to the schema. The first sequence he identifies as the “feud pattern” which is structured like so: introduction/conflict (balance disturbed), first retaliatory strike followed by x number of revenge acts leading inexorably to the climax, more revenge acts, and a final settlement (balance restored). It is apparent that this is an evolution of Andersson’s proposed structure, still centred on the climax as the narrative anchor, but broken down into a more episodic formula.

Lönnroth, however, expands yet further by introducing another action pattern he describes as the “travel pattern” consisting of: “departure (*Útanferð*), a series of tests, including court visits and Viking adventures, and homecoming (*Útkoma*).”⁴⁰ Whilst Lönnroth states that his action pattern can

³⁹ Lars Lönnroth, *Njáls Saga: A Critical Introduction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press), p.68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 71.

be found in other sagas, such as *Njál's saga*, it is perhaps most obvious within a series of shorter sagas collectively labelled as *skáldasögur* (skald sagas). These *skáldasögur* focus upon the travels, love triangles and rivalries of their eponymous heroes. Travel abroad features heavily in these narratives, and in *Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*, (The Saga of Gunnlaugr Serpent Tongue) we find a prime example of Lönnroth's second action pattern. In short, Gunnlaug falls in love with a woman called Helga but he wishes to travel abroad to make a name for himself (departure). There he has encounters with jarls and kings, not always successfully, and gets caught up in international battles (a series of tests). His adventures bring him into contact with Hrafn, a fellow skald and one-time friend, who thanks to a slight on behalf of Gunnlaug becomes a bitter rival for Helga's hand in marriage. Eventually, Gunnlaug returns home only to find Hrafn has married Helga before him (homecoming). This leads to the tragic climax of the piece where the two fight to the death overseas. These adventures with jarls and kings are tightly integrated with the love story, for the rivalry between Gunnlaug and Hrafn begins at the court of the Swedish king and reaches its tragic conclusion abroad.⁴¹

The narrative within *Faith of their Fathers* was always intended to be located in more than one geographic location. To tell the story of king Olaf Tryggvason and his attempts at Christianisation, it was imperative that the narrative shift away from Iceland to Norway. The second action pattern put forward by Lönnroth provided a means of further emulating the sagas without defying convention. As such, the novel was divided into two parts that are designed to, at least partially, emulate these two actions patterns. Part two introduces the tropes found within the *skáldasögur*. The protagonist, Arinbjorn, decides to leave for mainland Scandinavia after his fateful encounter with the priest Thangbrandur on the ice fields (departure). His pursuit leads him into the halls of king Olaf Tryggvason where he is engaged as a housecarl before joining the king in his battles abroad (a series of tests). Finally, Arinbjorn's friend and foster-brother Sigvaldi, returns home to Freya to report Arinbjorn's death (homecoming).

⁴¹ *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, trans. Katrina Atwood, in *Sagas of Warrior Poets* ed. Örnólfur Thorsson (London: Penguin Books, 1997) pp. 109-149.

Andersson's, Lönnroth's and Byock's frameworks all agreed that the concept of feud and social disruption played a central part in the composition of saga form, and both Lönnroth and Byock's analysis proved useful in their ability to map onto a different schema. *Faith of their Fathers*, whilst exhibiting aspects of saga form within its structure, does not have its narrative centred around ever-increasing feud. Instead, it follows a different format, one more in keeping with a different style of composition entirely: the thriller.

In his *Handbook for Creative Writing* John Dale advises burgeoning authors on the modern conceptualisation of genre in constructing texts. He argues that crime fiction, and thriller in particular, is structurally informed by the novella form: "a short, sharp, tightly-written narrative consisting of a series of increasingly intense climaxes".⁴² It is this string of climaxes that I wish to address here. As has been mentioned above, *Faith of their Fathers* has its structural roots in the saga form, specifically borrowing from the more mutable schemas proposed by Byock and Lönnroth.

Over the course of the narrative there are a series of miniature climaxes, typically arranged to occur at the end of chapters. Whether the chapter ends with a death, as in the case of the thralls Conall and Fergus, or in the revelation of a betrayal such as Failend's, they are designed to encourage the audience to read on and see how the plot will unfold. This was achieved by incorporating Byock's feudemes into John Dale's definition of thriller structure in each chapter as a microcosm of the novel as a whole. Chapter eight, for example, when Arinbjorn and Sigvaldi attend the feast of Thorgeir the law speaker has all three aspects: conflict in the form of tension between the pagan chieftains and the Priest, advocacy when Gudrid reminds the delegation of their responsibilities, and resolution when an uneasy truce is achieved towards the end. It is literally represented in chapter twelve, when Olaf is ambushed by the opportunistic raiders of king Sweyn. The conflict is the sea battle, the advocacy the men who aid Olaf in overcoming the forces, and resolution when Olaf emerges triumphant from the battle. These series of climaxes gradually increases the stakes for both protagonists and antagonists;

⁴² John Dale, "Crime Fiction" in *The Handbook of Creative Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) p. 126.

Freya and Arinbjorn caught up in increasing Christian hostility and Olaf against the machinations of rival kings.

A series of ever-increasing climaxes, however, does little to define a novel's genre. In Iain M. Banks' *Player of Games*, the narrative focuses upon Jernau Morat Gurgeh, a famously skilled board game player who is enlisted by a government agency to win the most complex game ever devised. The game is so very lifelike, so complicated, that the society that designed it chooses their leaders based upon the winners. The novel is predicated around a series of miniature climaxes as Gurgeh works his way up through the ranks, defeating his opponents until he is left fighting for the emperorship itself. So far, so thrilling, until it is noted that this entire narrative takes place millennia in the future, contains sentient artificial intelligences and many of the characters are spaceships.⁴³ We are in need then, of a further set of narrative principles in order to help us discover the structure of a thriller.

For this we turn to Jerry Palmer, who neatly summarises what he believes to be the inherent characteristics of the classic thriller in *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre*. He argues that while there are many tropes shared in texts defined as thrillers, there are in fact only two motifs necessary to the definition of thriller: a hero and a conspiracy:

What is most significant is that the villain is dispensable: provided there is conspiracy, it is immaterial what the characteristics of the conspirator are. It is the characteristics of the conspiracy that are important.⁴⁴

Palmer continues that the conspiracy forms a key structural component of thrillers, and it is the potency of the conspiracy that dictates the efficacy of the narrative. A conspiracy that does not threaten to destabilise pre-established normalcy is inadequate. In Palmer's words, "it is only the truly monstrous that can serve as the subject of a thriller."⁴⁵ As mentioned above, societal imbalance and tension is an integral aspect of saga literature and so it is in *Faith of their Fathers*. One of the key components of the conspiratorial element of the novel is the mystery. Devoid of mystery, a

⁴³ Iain M. Banks, *The Player of Games* (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

⁴⁴ Jerry Palmer, *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1978) p. 53.

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 23.

protagonist faces opposition not conspiracy; the threat would be radically different. In *Faith of Fathers* the murder of Skjalti provides the impetus for the hero's involvement, and it is the conspiracy surrounding this death that drives the first part of the novel. On its own, however, a conspiracy is not narratively fulfilling. It must be unearthed by the protagonist. This is where Dale's series of smaller climaxes comes into effect; the narrative of part one is driven by the smaller, investigative reveals that occur throughout.

Palmer argues that, structurally, the timing of the unravelling of a conspiracy dictated the genre of the thriller. Thus, in a classic detective thriller such as *The Case of the Baited Hook* by Erle Stanley Gardner, aversion of the threat and the solution to the mystery are one and the same. The hero lawyer, Perry Mason, must defend a masked woman who conceals not just her identity but aspects of the case itself. It is not until the very end is the identity revealed, conspiracy unmasked, and the guilty party defeated.⁴⁶

Contrast this to Ian Fleming's novel *Goldfinger*, where the hero James Bond discovers the conspiracy behind Operation Grand Slam, an attempt by the novel's antagonist Auric Goldfinger to steal the gold from Fort Knox in Kentucky, relatively early on in the novel (chapter sixteen).⁴⁷ The remainder of the novel revolves around Bond attempting to subvert this threat. This early reveal, according to Palmer, would define Fleming's work as an adventure thriller.

Faith of their Fathers differs from the detective thriller pattern in that the conspirators and their ambitions are revealed halfway through the text and it becomes instead, according to Palmer's framework, more akin to an adventure thriller: Part one ends with Kormac and Thangbrander revealed as the agents behind Skjalti's death. The conspiracy is still a threat, however, despite the outing of the conspirators. Thanks to Thangbrander fleeing Iceland, and his murder of the other conspirator, there is no evidence sufficient to convince the agitated Christians of their malevolence and manipulations. In fact, it only succeeds in driving a further wedge between the divergent groups forming within this society. Thus, the tension no longer hinges on the mystery, but on how to neutralise the effects of the

⁴⁶ Erle Stanley Gardner, *The Case of the Baited Hook* (New York: Penzler Publishers, 2020).

⁴⁷ Ian Fleming, *Goldfinger* (London: Penguin, 2002) p. 94.

conspiracy itself. By Palmer's definition, *Faith of their Fathers* is thus more in keeping with an adventure thriller than a detective thriller.

In conclusion, in this examination of genre, we have shown how a specific "dominant procedure", structure, links the narrative frameworks of the Old Norse sagas and the modern thriller. Andersson's, Byock's and Lönnroth's analyses have highlighted the importance of feud and resolution in the composition of saga narratives. Equally, we have shown how the mysteries and criminal conspiracies prevalent within the modern thriller, as recognised by Palmer and Dale, can be applied to saga tropes in the composition of a hybrid text: *Faith of their Fathers*. The following chapter will now investigate in closer detail the sources of the novel, and explain how the tension between creativity and authenticity within the saga form provides precedent for the creative licence taken with the narrative within *Faith of their Fathers*.

Chapter II

Fact in Fiction: The Sources of *Faith of their Fathers*

Faith of their Fathers utilised two principal corpuses in the composition of its narrative: the purportedly historiographical *konungasögur* (kings' sagas) and the arguably more fictional *Íslendinga sögur*. As was discussed in the last chapter, these labels are modern applications given as part of critical discourse. This chapter will further explore the value of these definitions and examine the difference between these two types of accounts in relation to medieval Iceland and Norway; where does the boundary lie between fiction and non-fiction within these texts and did the original composers recognise this distinction? Throughout the course of this analysis, the sources utilised in the construction of *Faith of their Fathers* will be highlighted, explaining why they were used and, where appropriate, discuss where *Faith of their Fathers* diverges from these antecedents and why. It will be argued that *Faith of their Fathers* follows in the footsteps of its forebears, using a case study comparing the fictionalised Olaf Tryggvason within the novel against his counterpart recorded in the *konungasögur*. It will conclude that, much like the sagas themselves, *Faith of their Fathers* blurs the distinction between these modern concepts of genre. However, while the sagas may be intended to be read as historical, *Faith of their Fathers* is a knowingly fictive construct designed to capture the tone, mood, and plausibility of its sources providing an accessible gateway to this period for a contemporary audience.

Before we go much further, it is imperative that a functional definition of 'fact' and 'fiction' be provided. Frank Zipfel argues that 'fiction' should be utilised to describe a text as a whole, while 'fictional' should be reserved for elements within texts.¹ For many medieval texts such as the sources used in the construction of *Faith of their Fathers*, 'fictional' elements may be hard to identify both because of historical distance and a lack of available evidence from corroborating sources. To that end, historical 'fact' is defined by this author as something that is presented within the literary record

¹ Frank Zipfel, *Fiktion, Fiktivität, Fiktionalität. Analysen zur Fiktion in der Literatur und zum Fiktionsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Eric Schmidt Verlag, 2001), pp. 90-97.

that can be evidenced from non-literary sources such as archaeological. This, naturally, leaves large swathes of ancient and Old Norse Literature in a factual ‘grey zone’. It is this very mutability between fact and fiction in the sources that provides the modern author with the precedent to manipulate information to suit their narrative.

The *konungasögur* are “accepted as self-evident historiography”² by modern scholarship, but our understanding of that term is problematical, especially if we are assuming the same understanding of the concept in the original compilers. Consider Sverre Bagge, who argues that there is a fundamental distinction between modern and contemporary understandings of the term:

Modern historiography is essentially a contemplation of a past that is dead and gone forever. Its usefulness consists in explaining how the present grew out of the past, in showing the contrast between the past and the present, or in general observations on society and social change. By contrast, medieval historiography dealt with "a living past," describing good and bad actions as respectively an example or a warning to contemporaries.³

It is this “living past” that gives rise to problems in differentiating between the fictive and factual elements of a narrative and allows for debate regarding the sagas’ *reliability* as historical sources. However, it is widely considered that these sagas were at least “intended and received as history.”⁴ Scholars are thus at pains to draw a distinction between the modern and medieval expectations regarding the composition of history-writing. For example, Njörður P. Njarðvík when discussing one of the principal sources for *Faith of their Fathers*, *Heimskringla*, identifies the text as “documentary fiction”⁵ in an effort facilitate this distinction. Defining it in such a way allows for the composer, who is debatably Snorri Sturluson, to be analysed as a creative author rather than merely as a chronicler of events. For now, what is important is that the saga authors had a different understanding of the boundaries between fact and fiction.

In her essay “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland”, Diana Whaley discusses the evolution of Icelandic historiography and its basis in oral tradition. She explores how

² Ralph O’Connor, “History and Fiction” in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 88-110, p. 89.

³ Sverre Bagge, ‘Icelandic Uniqueness or a Common European Culture? The Case of the Kings’ Sagas’ in *Scandinavian Studies*, 69 (1997), 418–42, p. 421.

⁴ O’Conner, “History and Fiction”, p. 89.

⁵ Njörður P. Njarðvík, “800-Year Anniversary of Snorri Sturluson: Creator of Documentary Fiction” in *Atlantica and Iceland Review* 17, 4 (1979), 34-39.

these oral sources were mined for information and curated into scenes within the sagas. She argues that it is the oral tradition, and skaldic verse in particular, that forms the backbone of medieval Icelandic historiography: “Snorri Sturluson, for instance, singles out ancient poems (*forn kvæði*) as a preeminent source for his *Heimskringla*, and includes over six hundred skaldic quotations from over seventy skalds.”⁶

The use of skaldic verse as an authenticating device, a call to verify, is not without its methodological issues. Questions remain concerning whether skaldic poetry accurately reflects the Viking Age (the period in which they were supposedly composed) or the Late Middle Ages (when they were recorded in manuscripts). Equally, there are recurrent debates surrounding individual skaldic verses as being either “*ægte* (authentic, composed by recognized Viking- Age skalds) or *uægte* (inauthentic, fabricated by medieval Icelanders and falsely attributed to Viking- Age skalds)”.⁷ Even if many stanzas utilised in the sagas as authenticating devices are confirmed to have been composed within the Viking Age, and Mikael Males argues this is the case at least in regard to the “corroborative quotations [belonging] to *historia*”,⁸ questions remain regarding whether the verses survived unchanged from their oral transmission: did the saga authors have access to written verses or was it passed on through informants? Equally, were the medieval compilers concerned with the authenticity of skaldic verse, or is this classification a modern conception?⁹ The only thing that can be said with certainty is that, despite questions surrounding the veracity of these skaldic verses, they were still utilised by saga compilers in attempts to verify their own historiographies. The same can be said for the sources used in the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*: whilst they have not been used to verify a historiography, they have been used to add a sense of authenticity to a fictional narrative.

⁶ Diana Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland” in *Old Icelandic Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 161-202, p. 167.

⁷ Rolf Stavnem, “Creating Tradition: The Use of Skaldic Verse in Old Norse Historiography” in *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond Poetic Variety in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, ed. Martin Chase (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 87-101, p. 87.

⁸ Mikael Males, “Skáldskaparmál as a Tool for Composition of Pseudonymous Skaldic Poetry” in *Eddic, Skaldic, and Beyond Poetic Variety in Medieval Iceland and Norway*, ed. Martin Chase (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 62-74, p. 62.

⁹ Stavnem, “Creating Tradition: The Use of Skaldic Verse in Old Norse Historiography”, p. 87.

If the *konungasögur* are “fundamentally historical in purpose”¹⁰ what of the *Íslendinga sögur*, the other major genre of texts used in the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*? Sverrir Tómasson, argues that it is here that “a different tradition took shape” in which the medieval “authors seem to have been aware that they were interpreting the past and re-creating it without relying on anything except the facts of the imagination.”¹¹ However, this assessment hides a range of opinions within the critical discourse. Early scholars, such as Knut Liestøl, argued that the *Íslendinga sögur* are primarily oral in origin and composition, and that these structural elements were used as arguments for their seeming recounting of past events.¹² Later commentators from the “Icelandic School” maintained that the *Íslendinga sögur* contained vast parts of their narratives that were invented in the thirteenth century and drew heavily upon preceding European texts and their own imaginations.¹³ Regardless, some commentators such as Sigurður Nordal argue that despite these fictional elements even the *Íslendinga sögur* were intended to be received as history by their compilers.¹⁴

A more nuanced appraisal is offered by Slavica Ranković who argues that these two genres blend into one another, with “saga authors (or perhaps scribes who noticed the similarities between the accounts) [calling] upon famous historiographers such as Ari Þorgilsson and Sturla Þoraðarson to verify their claims. And, conversely, historiographers also [calling] upon the authority of sagas.”¹⁵

The utilisation of skaldic verse was not limited to acting as a form of evidence to corroborate historiographical accounts. Whaley explains how within the *Íslendinga sögur*, which she defines as “realistic historical fiction”, skaldic verse was utilised to help place their fictional narratives within the wider context of Icelandic chronology.¹⁶ This is best exemplified by the continued use of *lausavísur*, freestanding occasional verses, and longer pieces of skaldic verse such as praise poems

¹⁰ O’Conner, “History and Fiction”, p. 89.

¹¹ Sverrir Tómasson, “The Middle Ages: Old Icelandic Prose” in *A History of Icelandic Literature*, ed. Daisy Neijmann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006) pp. 64–173, p. 73.

¹² Knut Liestøl, *The Origin of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, trans. A. G. Jayne (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1930).

¹³ O’Conner, “History and Fiction”, p. 90.

¹⁴ Sigurður Nordal, *The Historical Element in the Icelandic Family Sagas* (Glasgow: Jackson, 1957).

¹⁵ Slavica Ranković, “Golden Ages and Fishing Grounds: The Emergent Past in the *Íslendingasögur*” in *Saga-Book of the Viking Society*, 30 (2006), 39–64, p. 47.

¹⁶ Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland”, p. 163.

(*drápa* and *flokkur*¹⁷) which are quoted extensively within the *Íslendinga sögur*, especially in sagas about poets where “they form part of the action rather than being used, as extracts from court poems are, to authenticate narratives.”¹⁸ Consider the use of skaldic verse in *Egils saga*, specifically those attributed by the saga author to Egil himself. Egil Skallagrímson was a renowned skaldic poet and warrior, who lived from c.905 to c.995. *Egils saga*, written by a later, anonymous author, was composed in the thirteenth century.¹⁹ Over the course of the saga several longer pieces of skaldic verse are cited by the author as having been composed by the historical Egil. These include *Sonatorrek*, *Höfuðlausn*, and *Arinbjarnarkviða*. Carolyne Larrington argues that “similarities of theme and vocabulary suggest that all three long poems were composed by the same poet.”²⁰ Further to this, Larrington argues that as *Höfuðlausn* can be plausibly dated to the tenth century this would, by inference, place all three cited poems within the correct time frame.²¹

There are, however, issues surrounding the transmission of *Sonatorrek* and *Arinbjarnarkviða* identified by Bjarni Einarsson when composing his edition of the saga. The poems are imperfectly preserved within the surviving manuscripts: *Möðruvallabók* (Manuscript M) only contains the first verse of *Sonatorrek*, while a more recent redaction, *Ketilsbók* (Manuscript K) seemingly preserves the entire poem. *Arinbjarnarkviða*, in contrast, does not appear at all in K, and the poem in M is not only written in a different hand (with the final verses near illegible) but also has a lacuna after one verse.²² Even without these issues with textual transmission, all that can be reasonably argued is that these poems were composed by the same author at the same time, not that this author was indeed the historical Egil. Regardless, the saga author *claims* that they are indeed authentic and uses these poems as part of their narrative concerning Egil’s life. Consider how they use *Sonatorrek*, which

¹⁷ For information on praise poetry and its antecedents see: Mathew Townsend, “Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry in Viking Age England” in *The Review of English Studies*, 51, No. 203 (2000), 349-370.

¹⁸ Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland”, p. 169.

¹⁹ For a summary of the debate surrounding a theory that the author of *Egil’s saga* is, in fact, Snorri Sturluson, disputed writer of the *Heimskringla*, see: Ralph West, “Snorri Sturluson and Egils Saga: Statistics of Style” in *Scandinavian Studies*, 52, No.2 (1980), 163-193.

²⁰ Carolyne Larrington, “Egill’s longer poems: Arinbjarnarkviða and Sonatorrek” in *Introductory Essays on Egils saga and Njáls saga*, ed. J. Hines and D. Slay (London: Viking Society for Northern Research), pp .49-63, p.49.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²² Bjarni Einarsson, *Egils saga*, (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2003), p. ix-xii.

laments the death of Egil's two sons, Böðvarr and Gunnar. The following stanza describes how Böðvarr died by drowning:

The sea-goddess
has ruffled me,
stripped me bare
of my loved ones:
the ocean severed
my family's bonds,
the tight knot
that ties me down.²³

The author of *Egil's saga* uses the information in these skaldic verses to create a prose narrative which dramatizes the events of Böðvarr's drowning: "A wild southern-westerly gale got up, against the current of the tide, and the sea grew very rough in the fjord, as often happens. In the end their ship sank beneath them, and they were all lost at sea."²⁴ This is notable for one particular phrase, "as often happens". Here, the later author, who seems familiar with the geography and weather of the region, invents a compelling and plausible narrative by using information that would be contextual knowledge to a contemporary audience. The author took a historical, personal account, and turned it into exciting fiction.

In some *Íslendinga sögur*, *lausavísur* and longer skaldic poems are not only used as a means of authenticating narrative but also form a fundamental part of the action. In *Kormak's saga* the prose is once again based around skaldic verse, this time of the warrior-poet Kormakr.²⁵ There has been much debate surrounding the authenticity of these verses, and this debate is wrapped up in criticism surrounding the style and composition of the saga itself. There are several flaws in the arrangement of the narrative, some of which are minor and attributed by Möbius, the editor of the 1886 edition of *Kormaks saga*, to errors in textual transmission on behalf of scribes.²⁶ Yet others, however, such as minor inconsistencies and awkwardness in the details of the narrative, give the overall impression the saga is a "mass of rich and compelling material which has not been developed into a coherent

²³ *Egil's Saga* in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, trans. Andrew Wawn (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 152.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁵ *Kormak's Saga* in *Sagas of Warrior Poets*, trans. Rory McTurk (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

²⁶ Theodore Möbius, *Kormaks saga* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010), p. 81.

whole.”²⁷ The narrative follows the doomed relationship between Kormakr and Steingerðr and contains no less than eighty-five verses of poetry, sixty-four of which are attributed to the historical Kormakr, and the prose narrative seems to be predicated upon the poetry. However, the task of establishing whether the verses genuinely predate the saga, and are authentic in the sense they were truly written by the historical Kormakr, is not a straightforward one.²⁸

Regardless of the authenticity of these verses, what is interesting is that the historical Kormakr is independently verified as having worked as a court skald to Earl Sigurd of Lade and King Harald Grey-Cloak.²⁹ However, this is not mentioned in *Kormaks saga* itself, instead it merely states that he served under King Harald and it does not elucidate upon his poetic duties. This would imply that the anonymous author of *Kormak's Saga* was more interested in crafting a narrative based around the loving and spiteful poetry written about Kormakr's obsession with Steingerðr than the praise poetry Kormakr would have composed and recited at court. The saga author either took authentic historical poetry, written by a professional court poet, and chose to focus upon the personal romantic entanglements of Kormakr rather than his time in court or the saga author drafted their own poetry to

²⁷ Heather O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 6.

²⁸ Möbius was so convinced by the authenticity of the verses that he altered the linguistic forms to better correspond to tenth-century constructions. This is a prime example of the role editors and translators play in changing the transmission of the text and a warning about taking the text at face value. Finnur Jónsson attempted to create a series of criteria that could be applied to lausavísur specifically, intending to prove beyond reasonable doubt that all lausavísur utilised in the sagas predate the written sagas they are recorded in. He analyses linguistic evidence such as metre, word forms, and any discrepancies between prose and verse. He applied his analysis to *Kormaks saga* and concludes that the corrupted state of the verses in the saga is evidence for their authenticity, arguing the corruption is due to long periods of oral transmission. This argument is further refined by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, who maintains that even the verses that appear uncorrupted, and are in good reading condition, still predate the sagas and are only in good condition due to scribal corrections.

Several scholars, such as Jónsson and Meissner, have based their arguments on the authenticity of verses on the “spirit and tone” of the pagan kennings contained within, arguing that they thus cannot be later scribal fabrications. Heather O'Donoghue, however, has highlighted the issues with their approach: later, Christian skalds, still used pagan kennings in “deliberate imitation of the ‘old style’” even as they avoided direct allusion to the old gods. Bjarni Einarsson highlights the dangers of basing one's assessment on the style and syntax of verses whose date is not clear.

More compelling arguments have been based upon metrical and linguistic criteria. Einar, taking the *dróttkvætt* metre as the standard for skaldic verse, analyses the line length, alliteration, internal rhyme, and rhythm of the verses contained within *Kormaks saga*. He concludes that most of the verses contained within the saga are tenth-century, but demonstrating that they predate the saga in which they were transcribed is not the same as demonstrating they were composed by the historical Kormakr. For more information see: Finnur Jónsson, *Sagaernes lausavísur* (Copenhagen: H.H Thieles Bogtrykkeri, 1912), p. 13, Möbius, *Kormaks saga*, p. 99. Einar Ól. Sveinsson, “Löng er för Þrir Þættir um Ískar og Ískenzkar Sögur og Kvæði” in *Saga Book XX*, (1978) 138-142 and O'Donoghue, *The Genesis of Saga Narrative: Verse and Prose in Kormaks Saga*, p. 12.

²⁹ See: *Landnámabók*, trans. Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972).

create, in essence, a romance story. Either option shows us how historical sources were taken and adapted to suit the intended genre of the narrative, a process also utilised in the construction of *Faith of their Fathers*.

It is apparent then, that the practice of using historic poetic sources in the compilation of fictional narratives has been a fundamental part of *Íslendinga sögur* composition and the modern author is merely the latest in a long tradition. What sources then, were utilised in the composition of *Faith of their Fathers*?

Íslendingabók and *Kristni Saga* provided the bulk of information on the *Kristnitaka*, or Christianisation, of Iceland³⁰ Composed by Ari Þorgilsson, “the Learned”, *Íslendingabók* is the oldest extant historiographical account of the conversion. Ari was highly respected as a chronicler, both by his contemporaries and indeed by later scholars. Snorri Sturluson, writing in his prologue to *Heimskringla*, dated to c.1230, praises Ari for being the first person to record *fræði* (knowledge) in the Norse tongue and claims Ari was “very wise.”³¹ It is this respect for Ari that made his work an essential source for *Faith of their Fathers*. *Íslendingabók* provided details that were inserted into *Faith of their Fathers* and about which the narrative turns: the date of the conversion c.999/1000, missionary Þangbrandur’s failed conversion efforts, and the Althing in which the Law Speaker Þorgeirr made his case for peace between the rival faiths. It is important to note, however, that regardless of Ari’s intent to write a historiographical account it would not be without its own inherent biases. Hayden White, when discussing the validity of historiographical narratives, argues that “the shape of the relationships which will appear to be inherent in the objects inhabiting the field will in reality have been imposed on the field by the investigator in the very act of identifying and describing the objects that he finds there.”³² In short, the biases and perspectives of the historian determines both the narratives constructed and hypothesised connections between historical events. Ari, like all

³⁰ *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006).

³¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulks, Vol.1 (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2017), p. 4.

³² Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artefact” in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, eds. R.H. Canary and H. Kozicki (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp.41-62, p. 60.

historians, is promoting a specific agenda. Siân Grønlie, in the introduction to her translation of the saga, explores the relative brevity of Ari's account and proposes that the author's "ideological basis"³³ encouraged him to focus on specific families and chieftains.

Ari "was intensely interested in chronology – as witnessed by the prominence he gives to early Icelanders' attempts to improve correlation between the solar year and the lunar month."³⁴ The basic framework of *Íslendingabók* is predicated on a list of Icelandic Law Speakers who are provided with the lengths of their terms of office. This is then further contextualised with international points of reference such as the slaying of the English King Edmund, papacies, and the reigns of various European monarchs. Jesse Byock argues in *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* that the collective memory of the medieval Icelandic saga compilers recalled seminal moments within their history, from the settlement itself through to famous meetings of the Althing. As such, he continues, the saga authors were more preoccupied with the fact that they had to ensure their work conformed to an existing corpus of oral sources. Events, feuds and characters, dating from the settlement period through to the age when sagas were written, were all components of a traditional, and oral, store of information.³⁵

In a way, *Faith of their Fathers* is also bound by this principle. By utilising *Íslendingabók* as material for the narrative, certain events and characters are predicated upon their appearance in the source. Characters such as Þorgeirr the Law Speaker and Þangbrandur the missionary priest appear in both *Íslendingabók* and *Kristni saga*; as such, their roles within the narrative of *Faith of their Fathers* align with these extant versions, albeit with substantial alterations.

Even though he must ensure his work conformed to the oral, and potentially written, histories he utilised, it is clear Ari had his own agenda. Siân Grønlie, in her introductory essay on *Íslendingabók*, argues that when compared to other works such as *Landnámabók* (The Book of Settlements) and *Kristni Saga*, it seems remarkably short. Ari omits information such as the Irish

³³ *Íslendingabók. Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, p. x.

³⁴ Whaley, "A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland", p. 170.

³⁵ Byock, *Feud in the Icelandic Saga* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

settlers found in chapters six to eight of *Landnámabók*,³⁶ a text composed in the thirteenth century. Genealogical analysis of the *Landnámabók* manuscripts implies that the five extant copies were dependent upon their own antecedents, one of which appears to be a Book of Settlements written by Ari himself.³⁷ Why then would Ari omit this information in one text but not the other? Grønlie explores the notion that Ari was more concerned with explaining “how the leading families of his own day had got to where they were”³⁸ and the guiding principles behind the composition of *Íslendingabók* were centred around a burgeoning sense of national identity in the early twelfth century. With this in mind, it is understandable why Ari would omit information about Irish settlers when his focus is upon an embryonic concept of *Icelandic* identity.³⁹

It is, however, this mentioning of Irish thralls in *Landnámabók* that prompted the inclusion of the thralls Failend, Conall and Fergus within *Faith of their Fathers*. These characters, while complete fabrications, are meant to embody the fact that people of Irish origin made up a significant portion of both the original settlers and their thralls. In fact, the death of Conall and Fergus, and the betrayal of Failend, are crucial loci about which the narrative turns. To distinguish them from the other characters within the novel, their names were not given in their Old Norse version, but in Gaelic.

With this in mind, it is worth examining the provenance of *Landnámabók* given its influence upon *Faith of their Fathers*. It is a broadly historiographical account of the Land Taking, and it recounts the names of the original settlers and where they lived. As mentioned earlier, there are five extant manuscript versions. Three of these are medieval redactions known as *Melabók*, *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók*. In the seventeenth century two further versions were compiled known as *Pórðarbók* and *Skarðsárbók*. Jointly these texts cover the colonisation of Iceland from the late ninth century, highlighting the way the original settlers acquired possession of the uninhabited land. However, details within individual chapters that account for settler’s names, place names and genealogy differ

³⁶ *Landnámabók*, trans. Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1972), pp. 19-21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.5

³⁸ *Íslendingabók, Kristni Saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Grønlie, p. xviii.

³⁹ For an analysis of the relationship between these accounts and why scholars have concluded there was likely a no longer extant version of Ari’s work, see: Theodore M. Andersson, *The Problem of Icelandic Saga Origins: A Historical Survey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964).

between the extant versions. Anne-Marie Long, writing about *Sturlubók*, argues “the variations between the preserved accounts suggest not only that *Landnámabók* was an ‘unstable text’ but that each version reflected the creative abilities of its compiler as well as his cultural, historical and social environment. Each redaction of *Landnámabók* might thus be seen as a document of cultural utility that functioned as an important social and political tool.”⁴⁰

Landnámabók has been a source of information for fictional accounts for centuries. The authors of the *Íslendinga sögur* themselves utilised the information presented within. Vivid incidents, both bizarre and mundane, that are recounted in *Landnámabók* are greatly elaborated on within the later sagas. Consider *Laxdæla saga*, written in the thirteenth century either contemporaneously with, or more likely after, *Landnámabók*. It elaborates upon the life of Auð/Unn The Deep-minded, daughter of Ketill Flat nose, the progenitor of the people of Breiðafjörðr in west Iceland. *Landnámabók* focuses more upon the genealogy of the early settlers, and Auð is mentioned only in four dry chapters in relation to her children and the various land holdings she helped set up for her kin.⁴¹ Whereas within *Laxdæla saga* these land claims are dramatized with politics, interpersonal disputes and blood feuds. The historical Auð/Unn is used by the author as a narrative foil for the, arguably, main protagonist Gudrun Osvifsdottir⁴².

R. G. Collingwood believed that historians are, in fact, story tellers and posited that history only made sense when suitable narratives were threaded through the “facts”. Historians had to use the “constructive imagination”⁴³ to invent a plausible narrative that linked the fragmentary historical record together. Hayden White, writing in his *Metahistory*, elaborates upon this concept. He argues that historiographers utilise the same narrative techniques as their literary counterparts in their “emplotment” of their accounts. There is, he continues, no way casually recorded historical events can constitute a plausible narrative. These events can *only* be given meaning through their compilation

⁴⁰ Anne-Marie Long, “Sturlubók and Cultural Memory” in *Sturla Þórðarson Skald, Chieftain and Lawman*, eds. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 56-69, p. 57.

⁴¹ *Landnámabók*, trans. Herman Pálsson and Paul, p. 50-53.

⁴² *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, trans. Keneva Kunz (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), p. 270.

⁴³ R.G Collingwood, "The Historical Imagination" in *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 232-249.

into a unique narrative guided by the authorial intent of the compiler.⁴⁴ If we accept, as Sigurður Nordal suggests above, that the *Íslendinga sögur* were *intended* to be received as history, then it would appear the author of *Laxdæla saga* used their constructive imagination to invent a plausible narrative based upon the fragmentary record preserved within *Landnámabók*.

In contrast to this, the modern historical novelist may portray historical events and periods with interpolations or poetic embellishment without fear of raising these existential questions regarding the authenticity of the account. Authors such as Robert Harris or Philippa Gregory often include ‘non-factual’ elements that are seemingly accepted by their audiences without issue. Gesine Manuwald, writing in *Fact and Fiction in the Roman Historical epic*, questions to what extent recipients are “aware of what is ‘factual’ or ‘fictional’ or even make an effort to distinguish between the two, rather than preferring to accept the narrated story as a version of events.”⁴⁵ It is this concept of a fictive narrative as a *version* of events that deserves close examination. When a modern reader engages with a demonstrably fictive text such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* how much of the narrative do they accept as plausible?⁴⁶ When constructing *Faith of their Fathers*, careful attention was paid to the creation of the characters, both fictive and historical. It is the modern reader’s ability to engage with, and believe in, a character that propels them through any given narrative. Whether a reader will believe something is *plausible* may depend heavily upon their ability to conceive of characters behaving the way they do in set circumstances. The characters of Arinbjorn, Sigvaldi and Freya are all fictional constructs as are their respective families. However, they interact with various characters whose factual analogues are recorded in multiple historical sources.

Whether the fictional characters, and by extension the events they take part in, are believed to be plausible by the reader depends heavily upon on the cultural context of the intended audience.

Writing in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Yehong Zhang and Gerhard Lauer propose the concept of “literary relativity”. This, they argue, is when readers “fill in the gaps within texts by inferring the

⁴⁴ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975).

⁴⁵ Gesine Manuwald, “‘Fact’ and ‘Fiction’ in Roman Historical Epic” in *Greece & Rome*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (2014), 204-221, p. 204.

⁴⁶ Philippa Gregory, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (Harper Collins: New York, 2007).

missing information according to their cultural knowledge.”⁴⁷ As such, inference making by any given audience is heavily dependent upon their culture-specific thinking models and will affect how they interpret a text. In the case of *Faith of their Father*, the novel is set in a particular time and place with certain cultural practices that would be viewed negatively by a modern, Western audience. The fictional characters are, in fact, broadly anachronistic because they are designed to be relatable to a modern audience. Arinbjorn, in his pursuit of Freya, is not violent or physical, a trait widely reported in the sagas in the treatment of women. If this facet of Norse culture were included a modern reader may balk at the character and refuse to engage with them. Equally, the cultural act of castrating the poor so that they could not produce progeny that would be a drain on the subsistence community is equally absent from the novel.⁴⁸

The idea of moderating a narrative to suit its intended audience is not limited to the modern author, nor is it only an issue for non-historiographical accounts. One of the principal resources in the construction of the narrative within *Faith of their Fathers* is *Heimskringla*: a collection of *konungasögur* that relate to Swedish and Norwegian Kings up to 1177. The author, Snorri Sturluson, was compiling their manuscript during a tumultuous time in Norway and Iceland.⁴⁹ Christianity had been accepted as the prevailing faith in both countries, and the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson was making a concerted effort to take control of Iceland. As such, how the author framed the historical narrative was important if it was to be positively received by his audience, the nature of which has been a subject of debate within recent scholarship. Theodore M. Andersson argues that *Heimskringla* is intended for a Norwegian audience as much as an Icelandic one. He believes that Snorri deliberately tones down the critical account of the earlier anonymous *Morkinskinna* (rotten vellum) of warlike kings in the period between 1030 and 1130⁵⁰. Andersson believes Snorri did this

⁴⁷ Yehong Zhang and Gerhard Lauer, “How Culture Shapes the Reading of Fairy Tales: A Cross-Cultural Approach” in *Comparative Literature Studies* Vol. 52, No.4 (2015), 663-681, p. 664.

⁴⁸ *The Laws of Early Iceland: Grágás II*, trans. Andrew Dennis, Peter Foote and Richard Perkins (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2000), p. 50.

⁴⁹ Snorri Sturluson was an Icelandic politician, poet, and historian, in the early thirteenth century, However, Snorri’s authorship has come into dispute in recent years. See: Patricia Pires Boulhosa, *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway: Medieval Sagas and Legal Texts* (Leiden and Boston: The Northern World, 2005), pp. 5-42.

⁵⁰ *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings 1030-1157*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson and Kari Ellen Gade (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

“to remove the signs of Icelandic distrust in order to promote better relations with the mother country.”⁵¹ Magnús Fjalldal argues against this, maintaining that *Heimskringla* is a piece of political propaganda intended solely for an Icelandic audience. He predicates his argument on the state of politics between Iceland and Norway during the composition of the text citing trade disputes, armed conflict and military expeditions resulting in Icelanders’ perceiving these events as “of the aggressiveness and expansionist tendencies of the Norwegian crown.”⁵² What Fjalldal fails to consider is that if it is propaganda designed to act as a “warning to Snorri’s Icelandic audience to stay clear of the Norwegian royal house”⁵³ then it stands to reason someone within the Norwegian royal house vetted the message within. In either case, Snorri would have had to moderate the message within to ensure it conformed to both sets of audiences and was fit for purpose.

Within *Heimskringla*, Snorri portrays the pagan beliefs of his cultural forebears with sympathy. However, his sympathies disappear when Christian and pagan beliefs clash. A prime example of this is in relation to the portrayal of religious matters pertaining to King Hákon Haraldsson of Norway. In Snorri’s version of *Hákonar saga góða* (The Saga of Hákon the Good) he informs us that Hákon, raised as a Christian in England, attempted to impose Christianity on Norway, but that it was fiercely opposed by his countrymen. Instead, the Norwegians force him to participate in heathen rites, including eating horse flesh and praising Oðin (chapters 17-18). It appears that the author, potentially utilising Ari as a source, invents these circumstances to explain why Norway did not convert sooner despite having a Christian king. Here it is apparent that the ideology of the author appears to shape the retelling of these older narratives. Robert D. Faulk argues that the chief method of composition for saga-writers was to interpret old poems of the court skalds, passed on through oral tradition and guessing at the historical circumstances of their composition. These are the *lausavísur*

⁵¹ Theodore M. Andersson, “The Politics of Snorri Sturluson” in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 93, 1 (1994), 55–78, p. 71.

⁵² Magnús Fjalldal, “Beware of Norwegian Kings: Heimskringla as Propaganda” in *Scandinavian Studies*, 85, No. 4 (Winter 2013), 455-468, p. 456.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

mentioned above, along with longer praise poems such as *drápur* and *flokkur*⁵⁴, and they were then often used as evidence within the sagas to justify the account portrayed by the saga author.

Rolf Stavnem, however, believes that conceptualising the use of skaldic verse as either corroborative or dialogical in their appearance within the sagas is reductive. He argues that there “are plenty of situations in sagas in which verses are neither corroborative nor dialogical”⁵⁵ such as verses spoken by ghosts, speeches from the dead in dreams, or presented as soliloquies. Instead, he proposes that the verses should be viewed by their intended purpose, are they diegetic or extradiegetic:

The diegetic verses, produced by characters in the narrative, are integral to the story and are typical of *Íslendinga sögur*, whereas the extradiegetic verses belong to the level of the narrator, i.e. outside the story, and are typical of the *Konungasögur*.⁵⁶

Narratives can also be shaped by simple misunderstandings. Faulk explains how there are many instances where composers plainly misinterpret extradiegetic skaldic verse and therefore compose erroneous stories inspired by their misreading. Consider the skaldic verses attributed to Skúli Þorsteinsson, an eleventh century court skald thought to be a retainer of Jarl Sigvaldi: the jarl who, according to *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta*, betrayed Óláfr Tryggvason at the battle of Svolder. Skúli’s *flokkr* verses are incorporated by Snorri into *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta*. These stanzas are attributed to a skald involved in the battle and provide eyewitness testimony to the disappearance of Óláfr Tryggvason.⁵⁷ However, as Stavnem explains: “the corroborative function of the verse is not unproblematic [...] as the verse is clearly quoted to yield information about [Jarl] Sigvaldi, who is rather unimportant in the battle, although he plays a part in the events leading up to it.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, this stanza directly contradicts the prose bookending the verse itself which claims that Jarl Sigvaldi was absent from the battle.⁵⁹

⁵⁴Frederik Winkel Horn, *History of the Literature of the Scandinavian North from the Most Ancient Time to the Present*, trans. Rasmus B. Anderson (Chicago: S.C. Griggs and Company, 1884), p. 32.

⁵⁵ Stavnem, “Creating Tradition: The Use of Skaldic Verse in Old Norse Historiography”, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 93.

⁵⁷ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulks Vol.1 (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011) p. 221.

⁵⁸ Stavnem, “Creating Tradition: The Use of Skaldic Verse in Old Norse Historiography”, p.94.

⁵⁹ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, p. 224.

Further invention on the part of Snorri regarding his sources can be deduced at the end of *Hákonar saga góða*. Hákon Haraldsson is recorded as being buried in a heathen burial mound, whereupon “they spoke over his burial as the custom of heathen people was, directed him to Valhøll”.⁶⁰ Snorri recounts this bit of pagan practice because it is described in the *lausavísa* he uses as his source: Eyvinder Skáldaspillir’s court poem *Hákonarmál*.⁶¹ This poem explicitly states that Hákon rides off to *Valhøll* upon his death, and potentially worse for a Christian audience, is gladly received by the pagan gods because he honoured their shrines.

Then it was made clear
how this king had
well honoured holy places,
when Hákon was
hailed in welcome
by all the gods and powers.⁶²

Snorri goes to great lengths to absolve Hákon of the crime of apostasy, he claims that had Hákon not died in battle he would have gone to live among Christians to do penance. Compare this to another historiographical account, *Historia Norwegie*, written in Latin in the latter half of the twelfth century. The account of King Hákon is barely a few paragraphs long and ends with this damning conclusion:

In his concern to hold onto the royal grandeur, sad to say, he turned apostate and submitted himself to the bondage of idolatry, serving gods instead of God.⁶³

Given the existence of other accounts that predate his own, it is apparent that Snorri is sanitizing, or is ignorant of, material gleaned from other sources in much the same way that *Faith of their Fathers* sanitizes certain facts from Snorri’s material.⁶⁴

If the historiographical accounts were moderated to suit their intended audience, what of the *Íslendinga sögur*? Tommy Danielsson, when theorizing on the origins of the sagas, considers the target demographic. He argues that the *Íslendinga sögur* grew out of the tales of court appearances in the *Konungasögur*, the very appearances that seem predicated upon the royal praise poems of *drapur*

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp.115-119.

⁶² Ibid., p. 119.

⁶³ *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher, p. 83.

⁶⁴ For further information concerning the presentation of Hákon throughout historiography see: Sverre Bagge, "A Hero between Paganism and Christianity? Hákon the Good in Memory and History," *Poetik und Gedächtnis. Festschrift Heiko Uecker* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 185-210.

and *flokkur*.⁶⁵ They were written in the vernacular, which excludes non-native readers, and certain phraseology in the text implies a contextual awareness of the geographic space such as “out here”⁶⁶ and “in this land”.⁶⁷ While Danielsson identified a native demographic, Diana Whaley argues that wealth, social class and literacy should also be used to help up understand the intended audience of the sagas stating that, for example, “thralls rarely feature positively in the sagas, and women are rarely named save within genealogies or as wise women”.⁶⁸ As such, she posits, the writing was mostly intended for the powerful, Christian and learned men of the time.

This, inevitably, brings us back to Snorri. He wrote not only the historiographical *Heimskringla* but also *The Prose Edda* and, perhaps, *Egils Saga*. The *Prose Edda* is a textbook containing all the contextual knowledge one would need to understand the composition of skaldic verse, providing the most comprehensive account of Old Norse pagan mythology in existence. Kevin J. Wanner, writing in *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, discusses Snorri’s famed abilities with skaldic verse and how he adapted the oral verses in his prose writing. He argues that the thirteenth century Icelandic-Norwegian political situation and the changing tastes of the Norwegian court was the genesis of Snorri’s *Edda*.⁶⁹ It is this clear command of skaldic verse that leads this author to suspect that Snorri did not *mistakenly* use skaldic verse, but that he purposefully appropriated it in the composition of his historiographical narrative and, where it conflicted with his intent, he altered its context.

With this in mind, we will now examine the sources which provided the information on King Olaf Tryggvason, the principal antagonist of *Faith of their Fathers*, as a case study to showcase how the different source accounts provided scope for narrative change in the novel. The primary sources were two Latin texts *Historia Norwegie* and Theodoricus Monachus’ *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensium* (c.1180), an Old Norse account entitled *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* and *Óláfs*

⁶⁵ Tommy Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktsagans uppbyggnad* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1986).

⁶⁶ *The Saga of Grettir in Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas*, trans. G. Johnston and A. Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research), p. 77.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁶⁸ Whaley, “A Useful Past: Historical Writing in Medieval Iceland”, p. 190.

⁶⁹ Kevin J. Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

saga Tryggvasonar en Mesta. Each of these sources present the history of Óláfr differently, and clearly each author has their own agenda and intent. *Historia Norwegie* places great emphasis on the conversion narrative by developing a missionary biography of Óláfr that begins in Chapter XVII. The author recounts a long story about Óláfr's childhood where he is presented as an almost Christ-like figure, persecuted by rivals for the throne and enslaved as a child he flees to Russia.⁷⁰ Whilst this account is also included in Theodoricus' work, it is presented in a dry and terse style excluding many of the scenes describing Óláfr's dramatic escape, slavery and revenge. Instead it sums up his entire persecution thus:

After the death of his father Tryggvi, Óláfr could scarcely find a safe hiding-place on account of the traps set for him by Gunnhildr, who feared that he would succeed to the kingdom in place of her sons.⁷¹

Instead, Theodoricus seems less interested in dramatizing the circumstances of Óláfr's life and more in the parallels between history of the Church and Norwegian history. While both texts portray Óláfr in a positive light, the compiler's intent dictated not just the information contained within but also how that information was presented. All these sources then move on to describe Óláfr's conversion efforts. *Ágrip* only briefly mentions Óláfr's missionary efforts, with an almost perfunctory statement that he converted five countries, that he replaced pagan feasts with Christian ones, and that he built many churches.⁷² Sverre Bagge argues that this represents a change in intent on behalf of the compiler from a focus on faith "to institutions and customs, compared to the two Latin works."⁷³

The divergent narratives present within these historiographical sources provide the modern author with a great deal of interpretive leeway. Certain aspects that are mentioned across all four of these sources made their way into the text of *Faith of their Fathers*: Óláfr's time as a slave, his encounter with a prophetess that convinced him to convert⁷⁴, his wives and his ultimate fate at the

⁷⁰ *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher, p. 91.

⁷¹ Theodoricus Monarchus, *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, trans. David and Ian McDougal (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), pp.7-8.

⁷² *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, trans. M. J. Driscoll (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2008), p. 31.

⁷³ Sverre Bagge, "The Making of a Missionary King: The Medieval Accounts of Olaf Tryggvason and the Conversion of Norway" in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 105, No.4 (2006), 473-513, p.475.

⁷⁴ *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher, p. 93.

battle of Svǫldr. The fictional Olaf's motivations and behaviour are better understood by including these aspects from the sagas. His faith is real, if tinged with a desire for power, and the encounter with the prophetess highlights this. Equally, Olaf's relationship with his wives proves his undoing in the novel: in Chapter two, we learn that Olaf went on a month's long raid to recover from the death of his first wife, Geira. Later Tyra, his current wife, encourages him to lead an expedition against her former suitor, Burislav, and her brother, King Sweyn. It is this expedition that results in the climactic battle of the novel. There are also several scenes which are only accounted for within one or two of the saga sources that helped further define the fictional character of Olaf within the novel. In Chapter Nine of Theodoricus' account he recounts Óláfr's visit to Sigurðr, Jarl of Orkney. Óláfr attempts to convert Sigurðr through force of words but, when that fails, he abducts the Jarl's son, Þorfinnr, and threatens to slay him in his father's sight.⁷⁵ It is notable that this hostage taking and child threatening is not mentioned in *Historia Norwegie* instead the entire scene is glossed over:

This was effected in such a way that within five years he made all the tributary territories, that is Shetland, the Orkneys, the Faeroes and Iceland, remarkable in their devotion, joyous in their expectations and glowing affection for Christ.⁷⁶

The anonymous author clearly preferred to focus upon the outcome rather than the methods that were employed. For the purposes of *Faith of their Fathers*, these otherwise glossed over scenes proved integral to the composition of the fictional Olaf. This abduction scene was transliterated into the narrative: Olaf slays the Icelandic captive Einar's son on the deck of the *Ormrinn Langi* in defiance of the pagan gods as a demonstration to his crew. The violence the historical Óláfr's religious fervour produced was incorporated into the fictional Olaf. The abduction and death of a child is a powerful and visceral image, highlighting the extremes the character of Olaf was willing to embrace to bring his vassals to heel.

Óláfr's fate in the sources is uncertain, as his fleet is surrounded and defeated he either jumps or falls overboard at the battle of Svǫldr, never to be seen again. A later saga, written by the monk Oddr Snorrason, entitled *Saga of Olaf Tryggvason* (c.1190) is far more prosaic in its account of Óláfr's life

⁷⁵Theodoricus Monarchus, *The Ancient History of the Norwegian Kings*, p. 13.

⁷⁶*Historia Norwegie*, trans. Peter Fisher, p. 95.

than its predecessors. In his preface to the saga, Oddr urges the telling of the sagas about Christian kings, and more interestingly, condemns what seem to be traditional oral accounts:

It is proper for us to honor our king with mortal praise, since God exalts him with heavenly praise. It is better to listen to such things with pleasure than to listen to stepmother tales told by shepherd boys, in which one never knows whether there is truth because they always count the king least in their stories.⁷⁷

This implies a level of tension during the compiling of these narratives, clearly the Christian Oddr felt the need to combat still prevailing oral accounts with a written version of his own. This is no more apparent than Oddr's version of Óláfr's death/disappearance. The battle of Svǫldr goes poorly, and Óláfr betrayed by his own Jarl and surrounded by the overwhelming forces of King Sweyn of Denmark, King Óláfr Skotkonungr the Swede and King Burislav, knows he cannot win:

When King Olaf saw this, he marvelled greatly and said: "Great good fortune is on the side of the jarl, and God now wishes him to have the kingdom and the land." As he said that, everyone who was there, both his adversaries who followed the jarl and the king's men who remained alive, saw a heavenly light descend on the poop deck. Jarl Eirik's men struck into the light, thinking to slay the man whom God honoured with His light. When the light vanished, they could not see the king anywhere, and they searched for him everywhere in the ship and around the ship on the chance that he was in the water. But they did not find him.⁷⁸

The men end up believing Óláfr was some form of angel, a concept that is further exposed by the fact that when praying he seemed to be ensconced in a bright light; he rebuffs the advances of the god Þorr who flees from his presence, and two trolls (demons) complain about the harm Óláfr inflicted upon them.

While this version of events is certainly epic, it did not fit with the desire for plausibility within *Faith of their Fathers*. Faith, be it pagan or Christian, is an integral part of the narrative. The characters are presented as believing, without question, in their version of reality. However, it is through a character's interpretation of events that this faith was shown rather than having magic be a literal, present force in the novel. For example, after Arinbjorn is wounded at the battle of the glacier, he is presented as suffering from post-traumatic stress: he feels weak and nauseous, his heart rate rises and panic sets in whenever he remembers the event. His father interprets these symptoms as a sign of

⁷⁷ Oddr Snorrason, *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, trans. Theodore M. Andersson (Ithaca: Cornell University Library, 2003), p. 35.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.131.

malicious *seiðr* (magic), concluding that the blade that struck Arinbjorn was cursed. Cursed blades are a staple of the sagas, such as the blade *Tyrfing* which appears in the *fornaldarsaga* (Legendary Saga) *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*.⁷⁹ By having Thorleikr ascribe the psychological distress of his son to a curse, the notion of cursed weapons within the source material can be included in the narrative without the presence of literal magic. A modern audience is encouraged to understand what is happening to Arinbjorn, and to understand why a person in this particular time would believe it to be a magical effect.

Thus, the account of Óláfr's ascension by Oddr Snorrason was not tonally appropriate for *Faith of Fathers* with its literal, and liberal, use of holy spiritualism. Instead, Olaf's last stand in the novel is drawn from other sources, notably *Historia Norwegie* and *Heimskringla*. The *Historia* presents a succinct and ostensibly honest account, of the final battle:

When the battle was over, he could not be traced, dead or alive, from which some maintain that he sank in his armour beneath the waves.⁸⁰

Here Óláfr merely disappears, and author admits the historical record is too vague for them to commit one way or the other as to whether the king survived. They make note of the fact that he was potentially seen in a monastery sometime later, and aside from ascribing this to the potential aid of “angelic spirits”⁸¹, prefers instead to omit such speculation. Whilst this account is mostly kept in the later *Heimskringla*, it is notably more epic in its presentation. The battle of Svǫlðr is described in exquisite detail, making for memorable and dramatic action scenes that would not be out of place in a modern novel; it concludes with the following:

King Óláfr himself and Kolbjörn with him both then leapt overboard, and each on opposite sides. But the jarl's men had placed small boats all round near it and were killing those who leapt into the water, and when the king himself had leapt into the water, they tried to capture him and take him to Jarl Eiríkr.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, ed. G Turville-Petre (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1956), p. 1.

⁸⁰ *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Fisher, p. 99.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸² Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, p. 229.

Óláfr also disappears in this account and, aside from including some skaldic verse that implies that he may have lived, his fate remains inconclusive.⁸³ The battle in *Faith of their Fathers* was heavily inspired by this account by Snorri, with emphasis upon the bloody struggle and strategic naval warfare employed by both sides. Olaf fights to the last against overwhelming odds. However, Arinbjorn seizes his opportunity to exact revenge for the king's manipulations in Iceland by severing the mooring ropes that bound Olaf's fleet together and both fall overboard. Unlike the sources however, Olaf unrefutably dies in the battle as this was considered more narratively fulfilling.

The location of this final battle is an interesting conundrum in and of itself. Sources such as *Heimskringla*⁸⁴ and Snorri's own potential source *Fagrskinna* refer to it as *Svǫlðr* in the Baltic, while *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum* and *Historia Norwegie* identify the place as "Sjóland/Sjælland."⁸⁵ Due to these conflicting accounts, it was decided early on to use the location described by Adam of Bremen in his work *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*:

The encounter took place between Scania and Zealand, where kings usually go forth to war at sea. Now, the short crossing of the Baltic Sea at Elsinore, where Zealand can be seen from Scania, is a covert well known to pirates.⁸⁶

If one looks to a modern map of the Baltic Sea, one will find that this maps neatly onto the Oresund Channel that separates the island of Sjælland/Zealand from Scania, the southernmost province of Sweden. This location was utilised in the novel because a modern reader could readily research the exact location and provide a degree of factuality to the prose. It was the mutability of these divergent sources that provided the precedent to manipulate information concerning Óláfr. He was presented in any number of ways depending upon the compiler, and as such, his personality has been so broadly drawn as to almost have none. This meant that within *Faith of their Fathers*, Olaf could be presented

⁸³ Ibid., p.231.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

⁸⁵ For further information on *Svǫlðr* see: *Historia Norwegie*, trans. Fisher, p. 97, *Ágrip af Nóregskonungasögum*, trans. Driscoll, p. 33, and *Fagrskinna: A Catalogue of The Kings of Norway*, trans. Alison Finlay (Leiden: Koninklike Brill NV, 2004), p. 116.

⁸⁶ Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 82.

however the author saw fit whilst still predicating this version of Olaf on the literary antecedents. This approach was applied to the entire construction of the novel.

Conclusion

Over the course of the above chapters, we have discussed the relevance and issues surrounding genre classifications, how they have been applied to the Old Norse Sagas and, ultimately, how a specific “dominant procedure”, structure, allows for the seemingly disparate frameworks of Norse sagas and modern thrillers to be mapped onto each other. Lönnroth’s, Byock’s, and Andersson’s analyses all agree that feud and resolution leading to a balanced society are central tenets of saga literature, when combined with Dale and Palmer’s contention that thrillers must contain a combination of mystery, criminal conspiracy, and competitive individualism this allows for the creation of a hybrid text: *Faith of their Fathers*. The novel has, at its core, a conspiracy that destabilises Icelandic culture. Part one is a race to discover the conspirators, Kormac and Thangbrandur, in keeping with the structural aspects of the thriller. Part two, however, is modelled on the *Íslendinga sögur* travelling format as described above by Lönnroth. Throughout the novel, however, Byock’s feudemes are realised both in micro and macro form with its emphasis upon conflict, advocacy and resolution. When combined, these aspects hopefully draw into sharp relief the genre of the novel, with its fusions of historical antecedents and narrative frameworks.

Equally we have determined the positivistic definition of ‘fact’ or ‘fiction’ cannot be applied to the medieval Icelandic corpus: neither the historiographical *konungasögur* nor the *Íslendinga sögur*. Authors such as Snorri, Oddr, Ari, and their nameless contemporaries compiled their works with their intended audiences very much in mind. Driven by a burgeoning nationalism, *doctrina Christiana*, and their own literary tastes, these authors took the oral histories of their forebears and moulded them into nominally plausible accounts that were intended to be received as history, regardless of their reliability. Sagas were, at their core, a narrative form, but they were used by the medieval author to document the Icelanders’ early history as well as the history of Norwegian kings and their composition was heavily influenced by their intended audience. *Faith of their Fathers* draws upon this rich heritage. The modern reader’s expectations and cultural context dictated whether certain pieces of information would be included in, or omitted from, the novel. *Faith of their Fathers*,

unlike the sagas, is not intending to be read as historiography. It is, however, calling upon the precedents set by the saga authors in their references to literary antecedents, both skaldic and saga, in the composition of their own narratives. The careful curation of information from the sagas was used to compose a new, fictional, narrative that is both plausible and accessible to a modern audience.

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Appendix I : 2017/2018 Masters Portfolio

Prologue

The blood looked black in the moonlight. It had saturated the snow that had fallen in the early hours, pooling in a trail that led off into the valley. Kneeling, Gunnlaugr Egilsson grabbed a handful of the blooded ice and brought it to his nose.

He cast his gaze before him, straining to see where the trail disappeared. The wind was flowing across the plains, sweeping up the powdery snow into devils that twirled across the vista. The northern lights were bright tonight, bright enough that the green and purple tendrils could light the way. They snaked across the sky with their slow, undulating ribbons a comfort to the trapper. Unsure of the time, he tried to find the tell-tale spokes of Odin's Wagon; if the constellation was high in the sky then there would be many hours until dawn and a midnight hunt would be dangerous. Luckily, he found it slowly tapering away to the east. Sunrise would not be far off. He unsheathed his axe and began to follow the trail.

Two sets of tracks carved their way through the snow. The wounded man had been followed. Given the blood loss, and the erratic path of the wounded, the assailant could easily have caught up and over-powered their prey. Gunnlaugr surmised that the attacker had waited and followed their target, perhaps they wanted to see where their victim ran to. He picked up his pace as the pools of blood grew larger and larger until he found the source.

It was a young man, no more than eighteen winters by the looks of him. He lay on his back, glassy eyes reflecting the green river in the sky. He looked like one of Skjalti Olafsson's thralls; he recognised him from the nearby farm. Under the moonlight, Gunnlaugr could see the killing blow, an axe wound to the gut. It would have been slow and painful. His eyes were drawn to the token that lay clutched in the thrall's hand. A wooden cross. He plucked it from the corpse and ran his fingers over the coarse wood.

Gunnlaugr stood sharply and looked around for the second set of tracks. They continued onwards and down towards a longhouse, a small, earthen-roofed building sat by a frozen stream. After the snowfall it looked like any other hillock, but there was no doubt that was Skjalti's farm. With a parting look at the shocked face of the young thrall Gunnlaugr took off running, his long dark hair whipping against his face. He aimed for the farm and hoped he was not too late.

He found Skjalti's front door open and its large, weather worn, timber creaking lazily on unoiled hinges. Wind had brought snow across the threshold and damp footprints were imprinted in the earthen floor. Slowly, Gunnlaugr entered the farmhouse, axe raised. It was no warmer inside; the hearth fire had gone out. Ice crystals were already forming on the scorched logs and the last of the embers had long since faded.

His eyes adjusted as best they could as he moved deeper inside. The silence of the house was punctuated by the gentle ringing of hanging pots and pans moved by the wind. Making his way towards the sleeping area he tried to remember how many people lived in Skjalti's house; including immediate and foster family, along with thralls, there should have been twelve people here tonight.

He found them.

Skjalti, Jofrid, their children. All of them. Grimacing, Gunnlaugr reached out and touched the first body. Even in the darkness he recognised his old friend, with his balding head and tell-tale scar across the crown. Earned as a boy when the two of them had stolen a horse and Skjalti had fallen off in their mad dash for freedom. Now the head flopped in an ugly way. Gunnlaugr eased Skjalti's body onto its back, prying it off Jofrid who lay equally still in the cot. Skjalti had lain over her, protecting her. Frozen blood and entrails covered the sheep skins between them; they had been disembowelled. A low moan escaped Gunnlaugr lips as he released the body of his friend.

Moving further through the hall, he made his way to where the children slept. Tiny limbs, twisted and covered in blood, hung loosely from their cots. The strength in his legs failed him, and Gunnlaugr knelt besides the cot. Gently, he attempted to straighten the bodies of Ask and Embla, Skjalti's son and daughter. Running his hand through Embla's mouse-brown hair he used his growing tears to try and wipe away the blood from her face.

There was a change in the air behind him, a subtle shift that drew his attention back to the room. Whipping about he brought his axe to bear. It was too late. The blade cut deep into his left calf, severing the tendons and sending hot blood gushing. Screaming in shock and anger, he swung wildly, his left leg buckling. He missed his attacker who dropped back into the darkness.

“Coward!” He screamed. “Murderer!”

The response was another blade sinking into his arm, splicing flesh. He managed to hold his axe and counter with a thrust of his own. He hit his mark this time. The assassin let out a startled cry and fell back momentarily.

Gunnlaugr had to get outside. With his one good leg he limped and crawled out of the sleeping area. He tried to push off the ground and leap towards the door, but his strength failed him. He crashed into the frozen hearth fire, sending the ashen wood and cooking pots flying. Managing to use the momentum of his fall to roll towards the exit, he attempted to get back to his feet, but he found he could no longer feel his left leg at all.

The third blow struck then. Right between his shoulder blades. He felt the sharp edge embed itself in his flesh, sinking several inches before hitting bone. His scream filled the longhouse and he collapsed to his knees, dropping his axe. He knelt there, stunned, his lungs seeming to burn as he fought for breath. He felt a boot in the small of his back as his attacker used it to pry the weapon free. With a wet sound, the offending blade came clear of the wound and Gunnlaugr fell face first across the threshold and out into the cool snow.

Weak, confused, but determined to get away, he used his one good arm to drag himself all the way outside, leaving a trail of blood smeared across the ground. Hearing footsteps coming up behind him and he rolled onto his back, staring up at the doorway. Slowly, casually, the killer emerged and stood over Gunnlaugr. His face was shrouded, covered by the hood of his cloak, and he wore a strange garment underneath. It was heavily embroidered, and the pattern seemed familiar. In his stupor, however, Gunnlaugr struggled to place it.

His throat was filling with blood, and his breath came in ragged bursts. “Who are you?” He coughed over the words.

A shake of the head was his only response. The killer sheathed his weapons and leant down next to Gunnlaugr. He collected the fresh blood from the ground and began to paint across the door with his hands. Seemingly satisfied, he turned to face his victim. He searched Gunnlaugr's broken form, ignoring the weapons, animal hides and silver coin, until he found what he wanted: Gunnlaugr's cross. Ripping it from his neck, he cast it aside.

The murderer never did say anything. Instead, he rose to his feet and walked off, his form disappearing into the early morning sun that had begun to crest the horizon. Gunnlaugr could only watch him leave; grasping for breath, he tried to form words but he choked on the fluid in his lungs. As his consciousness began to fade, the morning light lit up the scene before him. There, on Skjalti's door, the killer had left a message. His vision darkened, and his breathing weakened, but he strained to make out the words:

False God

Chapter One

The white winter sun hung low over the horizon. Its light danced on the surface of the Øxará river as it foamed and tumbled its way down from the mountains and into lake Thingvallavatn. Speckled light caught in its foam as the waters cascaded down the Öxarárfoss waterfall. Arinbjorn took a breath of deep, crisp air, enjoying the biting sensation in his lungs. He watched as his flock slowly ambled down the riverbank, their thick, woollen coats picking up snow as they went.

“I blame you for this,” Arinbjorn said. He began to tie back his dark-blond hair so that it would not obstruct his vision. His horse, a black mare with a thick mane, shuffled beneath his feet. He steadied her.

“How is this my fault?” Sigvaldi answered as he guided his horse to Arinbjorn’s side. He turned and faced Arinbjorn, his green eyes bright in the morning sun. “You’re the one who lost the sheep.”

“Yes, but you were the one who convinced my father to give us this job.”

“How hard is it to herd sheep?”

The pair turned from the vista and back to the dozens of sheep making their way down stream towards the lake and his father’s hall. Arinbjorn could see the tendrils of smoke rising from the longhouse even from here, and several people milled about in the lands closest to the farm. He tried counting the sheep again: thirty-eight, just like before, and *definitely* two down.

“Apparently very,” Arinbjorn sighed. “We cannot go back without the other two.”

They had left early in the morning, the sun only just rising by the time they made it up into the Thingvellir valley, and set about finding his father’s flock. Letting them roam was risky during the winter, but they were a hardy sort and could withstand the cold comfortably provided they had access to enough grazing land. It was normally a simple enough task to find them, but they had proven surprisingly difficult to spot after the snowfall from the previous night. Arinbjorn and Sigvaldi had scoured the plains about the lake for hours before stumbling upon a small copse of ash trees. They found the herd there, sheltered from the wind and snow, grazing on the grass beneath.

“Are you sure there was supposed to be forty of them?” Sigvaldi ran his hand through his brown hair, pushing the strands out of his eyes as he looked about.

“Very.”

“Then we had better head back up there, I guess.” He gestured up-river towards the copse.

Arinbjorn eyed the land between them and the ash trees. The morning light cast purple shadow across the ravines and crevices, illuminating the twisting streams that criss-crossed the Thingvellir valley.

“Race you?” Arinbjorn smiled.

“Ari, we are already in enough trouble as it is.” Sigvaldi fixed him with a level stare as he manoeuvred his horse about. “It would be best for all if you just accepted defeat now.” He grinned and spurred his colt. Arinbjorn watched dumbly for a moment as his friend charged off up-river. Laughing, he kicked the sides of his mare and chased after him.

Like all Icelandic horses, their animals were short, stocky beasts. Powerful and hardy, Arinbjorn used his mare for everything from travel to tilling and, should she get old or sick, she would prove delicious roasted. She had been a stalwart companion for many years, and whilst she was nearing the end of her usefulness, she was a beauty. She was not, however, speedy. The poor girl strained beneath him, her breathing was laboured and despite his shouts of encouragement he watched as Sigvaldi pulled further and further ahead of him. He was managing to weave his way about the shallow streams that fed into the river, bounding towards their goal.

Arinbjorn sighed and slowed down to a trot. He was not going to win this one, and he saw no reason to risk the horse. Shaking his head, he carefully wound his way up towards his victorious friend. Sigvaldi had come to Arinbjorn’s farm when he was a child; his parents had come over from Norway and had no land to speak of. Thorleikr, Arinbjorn’s father, had offered to foster the boy until his parents had set up a farm of their own. They had grown up together and stayed close even after Sigvaldi had returned to his family. There was no better man, in Arinbjorn’s opinion, but he knew Sigvaldi would not shut up about this victory for days.

His horse whinnied in shock, snapping Arinbjorn out of his reverie. He looked down to see her front legs disappear into snow that slowly collapsed, revealing a gulley underneath. His mount

abruptly halted, managing to stop herself from falling forward. Arinbjorn was not so lucky. He was thrown out of his saddle, tumbling forward, and crashed into the hard, pebble bed of the shallow waters below. He cried out in shock as he landed on his side, pain shooting up his right arm as it collided with stone.

He lay there for a moment, stunned, letting the water wash over him. It was freezing, but it was numbing the pain. A shadow fell over him as his mare leaned over the edge and stared down into the gully.

“You’re lucky I won’t eat you for this,” he scolded. Gingerly, he stood up cradling his arm. He flexed his fingers and stretched the joints. It ached but he could move it. Trying to focus, he looked about the ravine. It was shallow, only a couple of metres deep, but the obsidian walls were slick and icy. He knew it would have to merge with the Öxará eventually, so he began to follow the trickle of water downstream. He made it only a couple of metres before he noticed two, snow topped, mounds ahead, blocking the path. Shuffling over to them he let out a resigned sigh. Sigvaldi’s head appeared over the top of the ravine, concern etched into his face.

“Ari! Are you alright?” he called down, his voice echoing in the confined space.

“I’m fine, Sig.” He looked up and gave a weak grin. “I found the sheep.”

Arinbjorn kicked the soft mound before him and the snow dropped away revealing two matted corpses. Their legs jutted out at an awkward angle and their black, glassy eyes stared out blankly.

“Shit,” Sigvaldi cursed. “Come on, I will get you out.”

“We need to take them with us.” Arinbjorn gestured to the dead ewes.

“Right,” Sigvaldi agreed. He disappeared and reappeared a moment later, a cotton rope in his hands. “Better get them tied up, I’ll haul them out.”

Nodding, Arinbjorn set about his task. It was difficult with his cold, rigid hands but he managed to secure the sheep. One at a time, Sigvaldi pulled them out until finally he brought Arinbjorn up and over the edge. They sat there for a moment, both catching their breath, the sun bathing them in a low light.

“That went well,” Sigvaldi said.

“At least I found the sheep.” Arinbjorn stared down the valley towards his long house. The shadows were getting longer already.

“Truly, the gods must favour you.” Sigvaldi got to his feet and offered his hand to Arinbjorn. He took it.

“You have no idea.” Arinbjorn smiled at his friend. “Come on. It is getting dark and we have to get back in time for the feast.” With that, they mounted their respective horses and began the long ride back to the farm, reuniting with the rest of the flock as they did so.

*

The sun was already beginning to set when the pair made their way to Thorleikr’s long house on the edge of lake Thingvallavatn. It was a long, low building with wooden walls and a thatched, earth covered roof. Large enough to provide shelter for Thorleikr’s family and extended compliment of thralls, it had been home to Arinbjorn all his life. Covered in snow it blended in almost perfectly with the surroundings.

They secured the sheep in their pen and made their way to greet Arinbjorn’s family. The air was thick and warm, the dense wooden walls and earthen roof keeping the majority of the heat from the hearth fire inside. It lit the room in shades of gold and red, and the hot dry smoke was welcome after the biting evening air. They arrived to a thunderous cheer as his father, Thorleikr, and the household stood to greet them in the main hall. Gudrun, his mother, had been preparing the feast; she stood at the hearth fire barking out orders to the thralls who rushed around preparing the main table. Upon her son’s entrance, she stopped shouting at them and began shouting at him.

“Frig cursed me the day she gave me you. To have so stupid a son.” Her smile belied her anger and she rushed over to embrace him. Despite her own impressive stature, she was as wide as she was tall; she only came to her son’s shoulders. Her round, rosy face beamed up at him as she buried herself in his chest.

“What are you talking about?” He held her tightly.

Her response was cut off by his father’s timely arrival. His advanced years had not taken their toll; thick white hair framed a wrinkled face, which creased with the warm smile that peaked out from his beard.

“Of my two children, you are the one that will drag me to Valhalla.”

“I always try to bring you honour, father.”

Thorleikr’s smile faltered.

“It is not my fault the sheep fell down the ravine,” Arinbjorn protested, “and I brought them back so that we could at least use them.”

“It is not the sheep of which I speak. Racing across the valleys? You could have been killed for your recklessness.”

Arinbjorn turned to Sigvaldi, his friend standing a polite distance behind.

“You told him?” He could not hide the anger in his voice.

Thorleikr struck his son about the head. The act was fast, belying his old frame, and his thick meaty fist was like a hammer striking upon exact spot he had struck his head earlier. “Sigvaldi told me nothing. One of the thralls watched you galloping up-river.”

The revelry behind them hushed a moment, and the various members of the household found somewhere else to be. Sigvaldi disappeared from Arinbjorn’s side.

“It was just a bit of fun, and we found the sheep!” Arinbjorn rose to his father, his face red.

“You were lucky! You could have fallen to your death.” Thorleikr gestured about the room. “And then what would we do without you to help?” He pointed towards a young girl, still only a child, sat in front of the hearth fire. “Your sister has just been returned to us by Kjartan, would you see her raised without a brother?”

Arinbjorn looked at his sister, Jorunn, a helmet far too big sat upon her head. One of his father’s, from his adventures in his younger days.

“You have only just become man; would you be struck down so early in life?” Thorleikr pressed. “Would you?”

“No, father.” Arinbjorn meant it.

“Good.” Without further word he guided his humbled son to the high seat and sat him down. The household assembled about them and took their places. “Today we honour my son. Who, foolish though he is, has managed to survive twenty winters this day. Please: eat, drink and praise Odin for

sparing my son from his own stupidity.” A shout rang out from somewhere and a dozen cups were raised, clashed in mid-air and a torrent of mead fell about the table covering the gathered feast.

“To Arinbjorn the Brave!” A cheer.

“To Arinbjorn the Shameless!” Laughter.

“To Arinbjorn the Bloody Lucky.” This last one came from Sigvaldi, who approached from the hearth fire carrying a flank of roasted pig. A chorus of agreement spread amongst the assembled crowd.

“You slander me!” Arinbjorn cried in mock defiance. “It was my finest hour.”

“Oh, I agree,” Sigvaldi countered, a smile beaming out from his trim beard.

The sting of wood smoke caused Arinbjorn to blink as he took another swig of mead. It hung heavy in the air, obscuring his vision of those at the other end of the high table and carried with it the scent of roasted and honeyed meats. It was almost enough to cover the earthy, peaty smell of the roof.

The celebration continued long into the night, with Arinbjorn spending most of the time talking with his family and Sigvaldi. His mother had clearly spent most of the afternoon preparing the food, lining the table with salted fish, roasted swine, sausages and lamb stew. He had taken to dipping his roasted pig into the stew. Jorunn bristled about her mother’s legs, pleading to join in the celebrations and drink like her brother. Being ignored not enough to dissuade her, she started stalking the high table in the hope of more pliable adults.

Arinbjorn allowed the mead to numb his mind, glad to ease his thoughts about the day and forget. As the evening wound to a close, and the crowd prepared to leave, Thorleikr gathered the household about him, calling for silence. Gradually the laughter and conversation died down and all attention was focused on him. He looked about the room, taking in the faces of his family and friends.

“Today, I could have lost a son.” The crowd shifted uncomfortably as the thought passed amongst them, “I ask that you all join me in offering our thanks to the All-Father, for sparing us grief this day.”

Jorunn ran up to her father, blond tousled hair flying wildly from underneath the helmet she had insisted on wearing all evening. It sat huge and unwieldy on her head, contrasting with the simple dress she wore, obscuring most of her face. She looked up at him, bright blue eyes shining.

“Would you like to lead the prayer, Jorunn?”

She nodded enthusiastically and Arinbjorn grinned to himself as the helmet rocked up and down on her head. Pleased, Thorleikr picked up his daughter and placed her on the table, helmet and all. The others all rose from their seats and waited for her to start. She recanted the prayer they all knew so well.

“Hail to you Day, hail, you Day’s sons; hail Night and daughter of Night, with blithe eyes look on all of us, and grant to those sitting here protection. Hail Aesir, hail Asynjur. Hail Earth that gives to all.”

The crowd repeated her words in unison, raising their cups one final time before turning to each other and beginning to say their goodbyes. Thorleikr and Gudrun took their daughter down from the table and began to escort her back to their sleeping quarters.

Together with Sigvaldi, Arinbjorn drank the rest of the mead and watched the others depart until it was just himself and his friend tending to the embers of the dying hearthfire. They wiled away the early hours swapping stories as they warmed themselves by the ashes. He found himself falling asleep by the fire when there was a knock from the front door. It was frantic, irregular and shocked the two out of their alcohol induced fugue.

“Has Hel come to claim us?” Sigvaldi shouted jumping up and grabbing his sax knife.

“Why would Hel, knock?” Arinbjorn asked as he unsteadily picked up the hand axe from the hearth fire.

The knocking continued and the pair advanced on the door, weapons raised.

“Who calls at this hour?” Arinbjorn shouted out.

“Hrapn Illugisson!”

“Hrapn?” Easing a little, Arinbjorn released the bolt locking the door and opened it to the night air. A flurry of snow carried across the threshold as they were greeted with the haggard face of Hrapn, their neighbour. Long black hair, damp with snow, clung to him and his grey eyes shone manically in the firelight. After seeing Arinbjorn he relaxed his gaze and replaced it with one of relief.

“You’re alive!” Hrapn reached out and grabbed Arinbjorn, pulling him into a tight embrace.

“Thank the gods.”

“You scared us half to death old man,” Sigvaldi said. “Of course he’s alive, it was only a slight fall.”

“What are you talking about?” Hrapn gave Sigvaldi an utterly perplexed look. He crossed the threshold and wiped off the snow that clung to him. “I’m here about your foster-father, Ari.”

“What about him?” Arinbjorn had only spent a few years in the care of Skjalti but he had fond memories of the old man. He had not seen the farmer in some time, not since he had taken to the new religion coming across from Norway.

“Skjalti is dead, Arinbjorn.”

Chapter Two

The water rose slowly, but inevitably, up the rocky sker; the seaweed that adorned it buoyant against the rising tide. The water that rolled into the sheer granite cliffs that lined the Lysefjord looked as bright and clear as the sky above them, darkened only by the deep shadows cast out by the flanking monoliths. Gulls flew high above, adding their cries to the sound of waves crashing. The sker was beginning to disappear now, the temporary island vanishing into the icy waters. It would have been a beautiful scene, were it not for the screams.

“How much longer until the tide swallows the sker?” King Olaf Tryggvason asked aloud. He was kneeling behind the tiller of his ship, the *Ormrinn Langi*, trying to focus on his rosary. The cries of the condemned made it difficult to focus on praying for their salvation.

“Not long now, Sire.” It was the coarse and assertive voice of Thorer Klakka, captain of the *Ormrinn Langi*. Thorer stood at his side but was facing the opposite direction, out across the deck of the great ship, barking orders to his men who ran about intently. His face was red from shouting and he ran his hand through his thick, dark beard repeatedly. It was a tick Olaf knew well.

“Why so concerned, captain?” Olaf asked. Thorer stopped shouting long enough to face his king.

“We should just kill these witches.” He gestured out to the slowly flooding sker. “They could use their *seiðr* any moment to upset us.”

“Death is not enough.” Relenting from his prayers, Olaf stood. “We must send a message.”

He could tell Thorer remained unconvinced. The pair watched as the chained figures on the sker began to thrash about in the water, writhing like worms. They seemed to slither across the briny outcropping as they tried to escape their fate, each one desperately trying to break free of their bonds. Their struggle was as horrifying as it was satisfying; it was good to know their gods did not favour them over his own.

*

Despite knowing the futility of it, Kjartan struggled against his bonds. They had hamstrung him, cutting his tendons and binding him to this rock. His arms strained in their binds behind him and his head ached from the parting blow that bastard Thorer had given him. Blood dripped down his brow and into the pools of seawater that lay about him.

He looked across at his companion, Steingerd. She lay on her side, arms and legs bound behind her, and stared back at him mutely. A look of resignation fixed on her face. They had taken her tongue to ensure she could not use her magic on them. Her short, mouse-brown hair was damp and clung to her scalp, obscuring most of her face. As the water level rose her hair flowed about her like seaweed.

There had been three of them originally, bound to this rock to await their sentence. Ogmund, however, had grown tired of waiting and had crawled across in his chains to the edge of the islet and fell in. The pair of them had watched as their companion disappeared beneath the waves and never returned. He did not even scream.

Kjartan screamed though. He screamed and shouted until his lungs were coarse. He cursed Olaf, the king who had welcomed him and his companions to court, only to turn on them when they had refused to convert. He cursed the sailors who had mutilated him and his friends under the orders of their mad ruler. Finally, he cursed this new god who would seek such punishment against him and his companions.

Throughout all this Steingerd had remained placid. The water had risen sufficiently now and clear began to fill her mouth and nose. She was retching and coughing as the saltwater coursed down into her lungs. Despite her seeming resignation to her fate, Kjartan watched as she tried to raise her head out of the sea. She could not maintain it; she kept disappearing repeatedly underneath the rising waves. Each stolen breath was followed by two deep gulps of salt-water until eventually she did not reappear.

Steingerd's body was slowly washed away and the water was now up to his own neck. The tide pulling him off the rapidly disappearing islet. It was ice cold, forcing his breath out of him in quick bursts. He tried to remain afloat, using what control of his legs and arms he had to tread the

water. The tide, however, was too strong. He continued to scream his curses until he, too, sank beneath the waves.

*

A southerly wind had begun to rise, carrying with it the scent of salt. It caught the sails of the *Ormrinn Langi*, puffing out the image of the dragon that lined them, and Olaf felt his great ship begin to edge away from the scene. The cries of the marooned rang across the winds. He was almost sure he heard his name being cursed. In the absence of their gods striking him down, however, he smiled. Eventually, the screams were drowned out either by the wind or the sea and the sker disappeared under the waves. Olaf turned from the fjord and looked out across the deck and down towards the dozens of men who crewed his ship. There was a grunt of approval from Thorer.

“The wind is on our side, my king. We leave at your command.”

“I think we have been waylaid long enough by *Vqlur*. Take us out, captain.”

Nodding, Thorer began to shout new orders and drums began to fill the air. The beat was shortly accompanied by the shouts and curses of seventy or so men, each sat upon their rowing benches, heaving their oars to the rhythm of the drummer. The great *drakkar* lurched as it turned into the wind, granting the ship an added boost, and once again Olaf felt the call of the sea as the *Ormrinn* cut through the waters.

“I’ll never be as happy as I am out here, Thorer,” Olaf sighed, “how long do you think it will take for us to reach our destination?”

“Three weeks at the most, the weather is fair.”

He allowed the wind and spray to wash over him, coating his finery: the red and purple tunic trimmed with gold, the green cloak with blue embroidery. He ran his hand through his short, blonde hair. It came away with a few greying strands that were caught by the wind, flying off into the sea.

“I’ve rarely seen you so contemplative, my king,” Thorer said, evenly.

“I will try not to take that as an insult,” Olaf replied wanly. “Have I ever shown you this?” He reached into his tunic and raised the sleeve above his bicep, showing a gold ring than banded his upper arm. It was simple, with a dragon motif and worn inscription.

“You’ve had that as long as I have known you,” Thorer said.

“Geira gave it to me. On our wedding day.”

“Your first wife?” Thorer asked.

Olaf simply nodded and began to slide it down his arm until it was free. He held it in both hands for a moment, running his thumb over the inscription. There was a time when he thought nothing was more important than Geira, once raiding a hundred villages in mourning for her death.

“She would be proud of what you have achieved; Norway has never been so united.”

“She was pagan.” With one final glance he took the ring and threw it overboard, watching it disappear beneath the waves.

“Increase the tempo. We are needed in Iceland, Thorer.” The sound of drums filled the silence between the two of them.

Chapter Three

Arinbjorn watched as the snowflake floated lazily on the morning breeze. It bobbed along, twisting and twirling through the air, catching the early light before coming to rest on Embala's pale cheek, sticking there. It was followed by another. And another. Soon her whole face would be covered. He reached out and gently brushed them away, his calloused fingers rough against her smooth skin. He watched as the snow continued to fall.

It had taken him the better part of the day to get to Skjalti's farm, by then the closest neighbours had already arrived and begun the process of removing the bodies. Twelve men had come to help. Heads of local households and a few choice thralls. They brought the bodies out of the house and lay them next to each other in the snow. He sat on a nearby embankment beside Embala's rigid form. Her brother, Ask, lay beside her. Arinbjorn fancied that their arms seemed to reach out to each other. He brushed some more snow off her face.

A series of low grunts brought his attention to the house. Sigvaldi was helping Hrapn carry out Jofrid's body. She had been a slight woman, but indomitable and fiercely protective of her family, he remembered earning many a strike from her bony hands. Now she lay slack in his friends' arms, covered in frozen blood. Hrapn and Sigvaldi shuffled across the ice and snow and brought his foster mother to rest next to her children.

"We could use your help." Sigvaldi's voice seemed far away, muted, but Arinbjorn turned to face him. He was gesturing to the house. "With Skjalti."

Arinbjorn nodded and rose from the ground. He followed his friend into the house and tried not to breathe too deeply. The air was still, with only a few pans clinking gently in the light breeze. Great arcs of frozen blood stained the walls and floor; he assumed it had come from Gunnlaugr, the trapper, who had been found frozen outside. The floor was lined with broken detritus: pots, plates and food lay scattered about, mixed with coals and ash from the hearth fire.

"If he killed them in their sleep, why is the place such a mess?" It was Hrapn from behind. He stood in the doorway, his face dour.

“I think Gunnlaugr walked in on the murderer.” Arinbjorn gestured to the scattered hearth fire. “It looks like one of them fell through fire and tried to flee.”

“How do you know Gunnlaugr was not their killer?” Sigvaldi asked.

“Because he was a good man,” Hrapn barked. He walked over to Sigvaldi. “I have known him since he was a boy and will not have his name dishonoured.”

Arinbjorn reached out and touched Hrapn’s shoulder. He flinched at the touch, but his stance eased.

“I cannot speak to his honour, but I know he worshiped the Christian god, like Skjalti.” Arinbjorn said as he looked about the farm. “He would not have done this.”

“You think this was a religious killing?” Hrapn asked. In response, Arinbjorn pointed towards the farm door and the words painted there. “‘False God’? That could mean anything.”

“If Gunnlaugr were the killer, why hasn’t the other man come forward and told us about the attack?” Arinbjorn asked.

“Other man?” Hrapn asked,

Arinbjorn gestured to the floor and the trail of blood that led outside. “Look here, see the tracks in the blood? Gunnlaugr crawled outside and was followed. Yet all of Skjalti’s household are accounted for in the dead. Someone else was here.” Kneeling down, he picked up the bloodied ice and sniffed it. “It has been days by the smell of it. The murderer must still be out there.”

Sigvaldi gave a small cough. “Well, speaking of gods. We need to decide what to do with the bodies.”

“What do you mean?” Hrapn again.

Arinbjorn, still squatting down on the floor, brushed some ice and dirt off a small wooden horse. Skjalti probably carved it himself for one of his children. “He means: how should we honour Skjalti and his family?”

Hrapn nodded in understanding. “I will order my men to begin making a pyre.”

“Skjalti would want to be buried,” Arinbjorn stated.

“The ground is frozen solid!” implored Hrapn.

“I will bury them myself if I have to.” Arinbjorn’s voice was sharp, cutting off the reply from Hrapn. He raised himself from the floor still holding the wooden horse. He turned from his friends and walked deeper into the building. The long house seemed darker here, the air close. He walked past the now empty beds, running his gaze over the bloodied straw mattresses. Finally, he came to Skjalti himself. He lay there, older and greyer than he remembered, but his foster father all the same. Kneeling, he ran his hand over Skjalti’s bald head, his fingers tracing the scars that lined the skull. Someone had already closed the eyes.

He looked at his old foster father for some time before he called back to his friends.

“Help me move him.”

*

The blade of the shovel barely pierced the earth on his first attempt, on his second he only managed to scrape a layer of permafrost off with it, by the third he had found his rhythm. It was slow work, but Arinbjorn refused to stop. Not even when the wood of the handle wore through his hide gloves and began chafe his palms. He simply placed his hands in the snow until the pain eased up, before tearing some linen from his tunic to cover the slowly reddening flesh.

After all the bodies had been removed from the house, most of the local farmers had returned to their homesteads to continue with their daily routines; they had objected to the concept of burying Skjalti and his kin. Arinbjorn, as the only living relative, had the last word. They left him behind along with Sigvaldi and Hrapn.

It was late morning by the time they had finished digging the first grave. It was shallow, but it would have to do. Gently, Arinbjorn picked up Embala whilst Sigvaldi carried Ask, and brought them over to the grave. They had dug it overlooking the small stream that ran down the back of Skjalti’s farm. It was mostly frozen, but water still tumbled and bubbled over the rocks as it made its way west. He had loved to play here as a child, leaping across the stream and trying to catch the fish pretending he was Thor catching Loki.

Arinbjorn stared at the small grave, the wind whistling along the tundra before him.

“What’s wrong?” Hrapn asked.

Arinbjorn looked down at the still form of Embala. “I don’t know which way she is supposed to lie.” The words caught in his throat.

“Southwest to Northeast.” Sigvaldi’s voice, calm and quiet, cut through his mental fugue. “With the head at the southwest.”

After a brief pause, Arinbjorn nodded. He lay Embala down in the earth, and Sigvaldi eased her brother beside her. Both were wrapped in whatever clean linen sheets they could find on the farm. Their tiny frames barely filled up the base. Kneeling beside their bodies he placed the small carved horse between them.

“Stand aside on this one, Ari,” Hrapn said gently. “Allow us to bury her.”

Arinbjorn retreated from the grave as Sigvaldi and Hrapn began to refill the hole. He watched as the frozen earth was methodically piled atop the two children. It did not take them long cover the bodies.

“I believe we are supposed to say a Christian prayer,” Sigvaldi said.

“I don’t know any,” Hrapn replied gruffly.

“Me neither,” Arinbjorn whispered. Instead, he stood at the base of the grave and cleared his throat, his voice quiet yet firm. “I swear, by your god or mine, that I will find who did this to you and kill them.” With that, he turned from the grave and made his way over to the still waiting corpses, tears filling his eyes.

*

The white of the sun was kissing the horizon when the final body was laid to rest. They had saved Skjalti till last. Whilst Arinbjorn and Sigvaldi dug the grave, Hrapn was sent inside to find any items Skjalti might have wished buried with him. Arinbjorn had barely spoken a word for the remainder of the day. Instead, he focused on digging the holes. Despite his precautions his hands had developed blisters and his back ached from the labour, but still he continued. He was so focused on his task that he did not hear the footsteps approaching.

“Arinbjorn.”

It was a soft voice, low and gentle, but it cut through the evening breeze. His back stiffened slightly, and he paused to drive the shovel into the ground, embedding it. He turned to face the new arrival.

“Freya.” She stood before him, a long hide overcoat wrapped around her linen dress. She pushed her head scarf back revealing her soft, sad face. He smiled up at her. She smiled too, but it did not reach her honey-coloured eyes. Strands of blonde hair were stuck to her flushed cheeks; her small nose was red, and her chest heaved through the thick coat as she caught her breath.

“It’s good to see you Freya,” Sigvaldi said walking up to her. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “I need to help Hrapn find some more treasures for Skjalti’s grave.” He departed for the farmhouse leaving Freya and Arinbjorn alone.

She stood above him, looking down into the grave.

“I’m sorry,” she said eventually.

“This isn’t your doing.” He left the spade in the ground and climbed out of the hole. He tried to dust off the ice and dirt but only succeeded in rubbing it further into his clothes. A genuine smile flashed across Freya’s lips.

“I would have come earlier but-”

“How is your husband?” Arinbjorn interrupted. “I’m surprised I didn’t see Njall here,”

“He had to go out on a hunt.” Her smile hardened. “He said I could come and pay my respects once he got back.”

“I’m glad he gave you permission.” His chest had tightened, but he maintained his level gaze. Snowflakes peppered her eyelashes. She blinked.

Turning away, Freya, looked at the almost finished grave; he watched her shoulders sag. When she looked at him again, the softness had returned to her eyes.

“Now is not the time for this,” she said. He felt her hand on his arm and he flinched despite himself, before easing into her touch. He placed his right hand on hers, feeling her soft cool fingers through the gaps in his gloves.

“Gods, what happened to your hands?” She pulled both his hands out. Gently, she pried away the bloodied linen bandages and looked them over. His flesh was cracked and split, with deep crevice

like wounds and blisters lining each palm. They were purple and angry. Her fingertips traced the worst of the damage.

“I needed to bury them.” It was all he could say. Now he had stopped working he could feel the pain in his hands, each beat of his heart made them swell and ache.

“You have to get inside; the frost could take them.”

“We are almost done, Skjalti is the last.” He eased his hands from her grip and began to wrap the linen back around them.

“Oh no you don’t, I can finish for you.” Before he could argue she jumped down into the hole, hair tumbling out of her kerchief, and pulled the spade out of the ground. “Unless you plan to fight me for it?”

Despite himself, Arinbjorn smiled. “My father always said only pick fights you can win.”

“Your father is a wise man.” She shovelled the last of the soil from the hole as Hrapn and Sigvaldi returned from the farmhouse. Both were bearing whatever arms and valuables they could find. Hrapn seemed to have favoured weaponry, carrying back two swords and a heavily worn shield. Sigvaldi had found some jewellery, a collection of gifts and rings Skjalti had received on his adventures as a youth.

“We found all we could,” Hrapn said. He dropped his goods at the base of the grave. “Freya, showing Ari how to do it, I see.”

“Someone has to.” This came from Sigvaldi. Freya stopped digging and threw the spade out of the hole.

“Come on, one of you men can help me up.” She held her arms out expectantly. Hrapn and Sigvaldi looked at each other and grinned; they reached down and grabbed an arm each, hoisting her up out of the hole. She dusted herself off and gave them both a hug. “Thank you. For helping him.”

“It was the least we could do for Skjalti,” Hrapn said.

“That’s not who I meant.” She gestured over to Arinbjorn. The two men nodded in understanding.

“Are you three finished?” Arinbjorn asked. “I need help laying him down.”

All four of them picked up Skjalti's body. He was wrapped in several cloaks, the only clean garments left. With great care they moved him into the grave and began adorning him with his life's treasures. As Hrapn lay down one of the swords he stopped to admire it for a moment.

"I remember when he came back with this. He said it was a gift from Jarl Hakkon, after he beat his best man in single combat," Hrapn said.

"He told me it was a gift for reciting poetry to Queen Gunnhild," Arinbjorn countered. The two men stared at each other before bursting out laughing. Freya and Sigvaldi looked on bemused.

"Skjalti? A skald? The dead would rise in disgust," Hrapn said through his laughter.

"I knew I was an idiot for believing him." Arinbjorn took the blade from Hrapn and stared at it a moment longer, his smile slowly fading. "He always told good stories though."

"Then does it matter if they were true?" Freya asked.

"No. It does not." Arinbjorn lay the sword by its former master and the others began to cover the body with soil.

Dusk had fallen by the time the four of them managed to cover the grave, and a chill wind brought flurries of snow. Sigvaldi found some wood from the house to make a rudimentary crucifix. He tied two pieces together with some twine and planted it firmly at the head of the grave.

"I think that's how you do it," Sigvaldi said.

"It will do," Hrapn replied. "Come, it's time to go home."

"I think I will take the river route back," Arinbjorn said. The group looked at him with incredulity. "I need time to think before I head home to face my father."

"Your hands are ruined, Ari," Freya said sternly. "You need to get inside as soon as possible."

Arinbjorn ignored her. "I believe the killer is still out there." He gestured to several indents in the snow that led down to the stream.

"You think the murderer fled down the stream." Freya said, comprehension dawning on her face.

"It would hide his footprints, but he would have to leave the waterway at some point. I may yet find some trace."

"I am coming with you," Freya said.

“Is Njall not expecting you back?” Sigvaldi’s tone was more curious than judgemental.

“He can wait.”

“Are you sure?” Arinbjorn asked, he watched Freya tighten her hide coat about her and cross her arms.

“East or west?” Hrapn asked.

Before Arinbjorn could answer Freya interjected. “West, there are more homesteads there.”

The walk was not arduous, but they still had to be careful. The snow had obscured the boundaries of the stream and twice Arinbjorn put his foot through thin ice into the shallow waters below. The sky above was muted, the gathered clouds a dark grey, but at least the snow had stopped. Arinbjorn hoped this meant that some trace might be found.

They walked for an hour before Freya found something. They had come to a farm that was even closer to the river than Skjalti’s. The longhouse sat on a small hill overlooking the frozen waters and a stable that backed right up against the water, providing drinking for sheep and horses.

“Wait!” She had fallen behind the other three and had to shout.

“What is it?” Arinbjorn asked as he slowly made his way back to her.

“Look!” She pointed to a series of ash trees that lay between the river and the farmhouse.

Arinbjorn squinted but he could not make out what she was pointed to. “What?”

Sighing with frustration, she grabbed Arinbjorn’s arm and dragged him over to the nearest ash. Finally, when he was practically upon it, he saw it. A small piece of cloth, caught on the low hanging branch. It fluttered in the wind, and as it twisted and turned, he saw the dark, tell-tale, stain of blood. Reaching out, he tore it from the tree.

He held it in his hands for a while.

“Who lives here?” he muttered.

No one answered.

“Who lives here?” he shouted this time, turning to look at his friends. “Tell me!”

Even in the darkness Arinbjorn could see Hrapn’s reticence. Eventually, he spoke.

“Thorgeir.” Hrapn swallowed. “The Lawspeaker.”

Chapter Four

Thangbrander felt the satisfying wet crack as his opponent's jaw buckled beneath his fist. His knuckles met cleanly with the lower jaw, connecting with an already disjointed chin. The crunch reverberated up his arm and he watched as the head snapped sharply to the right. A single gnarled tooth flew out and arced away onto the beach, trailing blood. Howling in pain his attacker retreated a few steps, leaving Thangbrander free to deal with the accomplice.

The second attacker was warier; a young man, with tiny arrogant eyes, he circled Thangbrander from a distance. He would close quickly with a few swift strikes before backing away again. This was foolish; it gave Thangbrander more time to prepare. He cast his eyes about the beach. The tide was low but had begun to turn, the grey water forming an icy froth as it washed up against the snow and sand. Where the snow had cleared, black rocks slick with seaweed jutted out. He began to back slowly into the water, wary of his footing on the slippery surface.

The assailant was forced to choose between meeting Thangbrander head on or enter the sea himself. He chose the former. Coming in with a wild series of punches, the young man lashed out. Thangbrander blocked easily, luring him deeper into shallows. He watched as his opponent overextended and lost his footing in the high water. Now, Thangbrander thought.

Parrying the blow, Thangbrander retaliated with a few well-placed punches to the gut. The youth let out a muted grunt as the air was forced out of his lungs, doubling over in pain. Seeing his chance, Thangbrander drove his hands into the man's hair, gripping tightly. He pulled as if to tear it from the scalp and brought him down upon his knee. A burst of blood and snot signalling a crushed nose.

Releasing his grip, he watched as the attacker floundered in the low tide and attempted to drag themselves up the beach. Slowly, he moved about this would be assailant and raised his leg. He brought it down hard on the lower back. The screams were choked out by sea water. Keeping his boot on the back, he watched them writhe.

“Enough!”

Thangbrander looked up the shore towards the sound of the command and saw Hallr Thorsteinsson making his way across the beach. His bloated form barely concealed by the heavy fur cloak he wore. He was unsteadily climbing over the rocks and snow, stumbling a few times, before making his way down to the beach proper. Thangbrander gave one last kick to the young man before turning and wading back to land. He emerged from the water just as Hallr made it down.

“Priest Thangbrander,” he wheezed. “Training goes well I see.”

Thangbrander looked over his shoulder at the two men; they were helping each other up off the beach and retreating to a polite distance to sit and lick their wounds.

“They couldn’t even hurt an old man,” he said. He looked down at his hands and saw his knuckles were raw and bloodied. “Excuse me.” Kneeling down, he ran his hands through the water, wincing slightly as the salt ran over his flesh.

“They are young and eager to join your cause.”

“Faith in Christ is not a cause. It is a necessity.” Thangbrander rose from the sea and began to walk slowly up the beach with Hallr following. He was soaked through, his tunic and trousers clinging to his meaty form. He felt the weight of his crucifix on his chest, a comforting feeling in the cold. “Why are you here, Hallr?”

“When you did not return, I thought maybe my boys got the better of you.”

Thangbrander’s laugh was as deep as it was unexpected. It seemed to echo along the shore. Hallr recoiled slightly before easing into a grin of his own. Thangbrander found a suitable rock and gingerly lowered himself down onto it. His muscles ached and his knees were slow to bend. He looked out over the roiling sea to the horizon where the dark, grey-green waters met with an equally unfriendly sky.

“Olaf is coming here, isn’t he?” It was more a statement than a question.

“Yes.” There was a pause. “He will be here in the next few weeks.”

Thangbrander ran a hand through his wet black hair, slicking it back.

“He expects progress,” Hallr said tentatively.

“I know what he expects.” Thangbrander looked at Hallr. His blubbery, red face was puffy in the chill wind. The chieftain finally looked away.

Thangbrander reached for his crucifix on his chest and held the wooden cross before him. The small, emaciated figure of Christ nailed to it never failed to bring him comfort. He spotted some blood from the fight had stained it. Frowning, he ran his thumb over it repeatedly.

“We should make our way back to my hall; you have a sermon to give,” Hallr said after a while. His high-pitched voice grated on Thangbrander.

“Yes,” he sighed. “We must not forget our flock. No matter how few they are.” Cold, damp and weary Thangbrander rose from his perch and returned the crucifix to his chest.

The stain had not shifted.

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The walk back from the beach to Hallr’s hall took longer than Thangbrander would have liked. The cold caused his knees to ache, slowing his progress. He refused Hallr or his sons’ help, insisting on walking and feeling the pain. The wind had picked up; whistling across the grasslands it brought the scent of the sea, chilling his bones. He wrapped his cloak tighter around himself and eased his way across the plains.

By the time they arrived at Hallr’s hall, a squat rectangular building with a triangular roof covered in grass, his congregation had already gathered. A deep throng of people huddled together outside. Even from a distance he could tell they were riled up, loud voices in heated debate carried on the wind.

“We cannot sit idly by whilst we are murdered in our own homes!”

“What would you have us do, Kormac, attack our brothers with no evidence?”

“We know those who reject our faith. We should rout them out.”

“More violence is not the answer. We should take trial to the assembly.”

“The laws do not respect our faith, our suffering means nothing to them.”

“I worship Christ, this does not mean I forget myself or where I come from, Kormac. We must proceed according to Law.”

“Then the law must be changed,” Thangbrander shouted above the arguing throng. His voice, deep and coarse, brought them all to silence. He strode forward confidently, trying to hide his wince at the stabbing pain in his knees. The crowd turned to face him as one, and he attempted to make out the source of the argument.

He spotted Kormac, a short man with unwashed hair and pockmarked face. His thin frame belied a wiry and taught physique. Thangbrander had baptised him only a few months ago. He was a lonely man, with no wife or family, and Thangbrander suspected he only became a Christian to feel part of something. No matter, Christ can make use of everyone.

His opponent was Gizurr the White, one of the first Thangbrander baptised when he had come to Iceland two years ago. He was older than Kormac, with a shock of white hair that belied his actual age. Gizurr had proven a passionate and thoughtful proponent of the faith here in Iceland, proving many times his command of oratory. Thangbrander had come to rely on him a great deal, one of the few capable men he had found on this forsaken island. He hated lying to him.

“Priest Thangbrander,” Gizurr said emerging from the crowd. He walked forward and embraced Thangbrander, his strong arms holding him tight. He whispered in his ear, “do not let the other’s see you hurt.”

Thangbrander smiled warmly and allowed his friend to take his weight and escort him into Hallr’s hall. Crossing the threshold, he was immediately hit with the warm dry air of the roaring hearth fire at its centre. The hall was small by most farmstead standards, barely tall enough to stand in. It meant, however, that the single fire warmed the space comfortably. Aside from Hallr’s sleeping area at the far end, tucked away into a discreet alcove, the majority of the room was taken up by seats and tables, all angled to face the high seat.

As much as he could irritate him, Hallr was truly generous of spirit; he had offered up his home freely as a place of worship for Christians, clearing out his own retinue in order to allow the slowly expanding flock to congregate here. Thangbrander chastised himself for getting mad at Hallr. He could not have achieved even this much without him. Typically, he led two sermons a week in these halls, but regularly held confession for his new charges. He had not considered the hardest part of his role would be to convince them to abandon many of their old traditions. Time and again he had

found some of the newly converted eating horse meat or exposing their new-born children if they could not afford to keep them. Confessions kept him busy.

Gently prying himself from his friends grasp, Thangbrander smiled at Gizurr and walked to the other end of the hall and eased himself into his seat. The highchair, a simple wooden construct with intricate patterning, had been given up by Hallr. Instead, he would sit at the Priest's right. Thangbrander watched as the throng slowly entered the hall and took up their usual positions. He looked about at each of the gathered, taking the time to mentally record their faces. They were silent, but anxious. He noticed Kormac sat as far away from Gizurr as he could.

There were no new converts. This was taking too long.

Once they had settled, he began to speak.

“Two years.” His voice filled the cramped space, he watched the look of mild confusion spread across the crowd. “Two years I have been on this island. Two years I have borne the word of God, bringing enlightenment and salvation to you happy few. It has not been an easy task. The people here are proud and set in their old ways.” There was a snort of derisive laughter from Kormac.

“I have watched you all struggle to accept the way of Christ, and to bring your friends and families to the faith. We have fought. We have preached. We have begged those we love to join us. But we have failed. Now, we find ourselves once again at the mercy of barbaric heathens.” The group grew restless before him, shuffling and looking about each other.

“What can we do?” Gizurr asked from his position at the front of the crowd.

“We must take the fight to them!” Kormac stood sharply and shouted. “For too long we have let them beat and mock us.”

“Christ was beaten and mocked. Did he turn to violence?” Gizurr retorted calmly.

“We must defend ourselves!”

Thangbrander raised his hands, Kormac eased up slightly but remained standing.

“I agree that we must defend ourselves; that's why I ask for every able-bodied man to join me in training,” Thangbrander gestured to the two bloodied and bruised sons of Hallr, who smiled weakly.

“The law on this island will not be changed through reasoned debate with unreasonable people. When Jesus went into the temple and saw usurers, did he meekly turn away?”

Murmurs of “No.” spread about the hall.

“When Moses came down from the mountain and saw the golden calf, did he meekly turn away?”

“No!” More confident now, the crowd swelled. All except Gizurr.

“When Korah, Dathan and Abiram led a rebellion against Moses, did he meekly turn away?”

“No!” There were cheers now. Shouts and cries filled the hall.

“Their false gods have no power here. Make them listen to us!” someone shouted.

“It is the Law that must be changed!” Gizurr shouted against the throng. Thangbrander watched as his friend turned to him with horror across his face.

“We will change the law Gizurr, I promise you that.”

Gizurr said nothing, but the hurt on his face was palpable. He turned from Thangbrander and made his way out through the braying congregation.

Thangbrander forced himself to smile.

“Go out from here. To your neighbours, your foster families, your friends. Cry out for justice. And if they will not listen, *make* them listen. Demand that assemblies meet to discuss your faith and the wrong doings brought down upon you. I will train you how to defend yourselves and, when the time comes, to attack.” Confident shouts of agreement spread throughout the hall.

“Christ is with us. Our suffering is as nothing compared to his. These challenges are only his way of testing our faith. We will resist these attempts to chase us away.” They were animated now, smiling holding onto each other in solidarity.

“We will bring the light of God to this island. We will find our salvation at the hands of Jesus Christ, our lord. Amen.”

“Amen.” Their cheers filled the room.

*

It was not until the last person had left the hall, leaving on a rapturous high, that Hallr spoke.

“You didn’t tell them about King Olaf.”

“My king wants results. He will have them.”

Thangbrander watched Hallr slowly rise from his seat.

“You play a dangerous game, Priest, lying to these people. What more would you do in the name of your king?” He left, leaving Thangbrander alone with his thoughts.

“You have no idea,” Thangbrander whispered.

Chapter Five

A heavy tear of glistening fat popped and spat as it glided down the steadily browning rump of the colt. It had been skinned and spitted, its legs removed so that the beast would fit over the fire, and hoisted into place. Thorgeir watched the meat slowly darken as the flames licked the flesh; browning at first before splitting and cracking, marbled fat pooled out of the seams and dropped into the fire below. The scent of the rosemary and salt salve filled his hall. His stomach rumbled.

“I can hear your hunger from over here.”

The sing song voice of his wife brought his attention back to the moment. Gudrid had finished basting the colt. She was smiling at him, grey eyes staring out from a round, pink face. Strands of her hair, once golden but now greying, clung to her forehead. The sweat glistening on her brow stirred a hunger of an altogether different kind in Thorgeir. He rose from his high seat and made his way down the long table.

“I am hungry.” He watched as she wiped the sweat from her brow and wiped her hands on her apron.

“It won’t be ready until tonight.” Her eyes shone brightly, and the dimples in her cheeks glowed.

“It’s not the horse I want.”

“What do you want?”

He reached out and pulled her towards him. After a moment of resistance, she fell willingly into his arms, laughing as she did so. She was slight, his arms could wrap around her fully, and he held her close to his chest.

“My dear white fox.”

“I haven’t been that in years, my love.”

“A few grey hairs do not blind me to your beauty.” Tracing a hand down her face, he moved a few wisps of her hair out of her eyes, his fingertips running across lines and wrinkles she had acquired over their long years together. He could still see the young girl who had teased him into swimming in

the hot springs at night. Their naked bodies pink in cold air and hot water, the stars their only witnesses.

Cupping her face, he leaned in for a kiss.

A knock, heavy and rapid, beat against his hall door.

Gudrid pulled out of their embrace, shock and annoyance spreading across her face as she turned to face the door. “Now who could that be? We are not expecting anyone for hours.”

“They better have a good reason for interrupting us.”

The aggressive knocking continued. Thorgeir went over to the hearth fire and pulled a hand axe out of a log. Inspecting it briefly, he made his way to the door.

Wind whistled through the crack beneath the door, chilling his feet as his approached. The wood buckled with each heavy knock. He raised his axe and tensed.

*

“Who comes to my hall?” A voice shouted from behind the door. Arinbjorn recognised it as that of Thorgeir. He stopped his banging.

“It is Arinbjorn, son of Thorleikr.”

“Arinbjorn?” Thorgeir said through the door. Then, more quietly, as if to someone else, “it’s Thorleikr’s youth.”

“What does he want?” A woman’s voice. Probably his wife. An image of Jofrid appeared in Arinbjorn’s head. He banished it quickly. He had to focus.

The sound of metal, poorly oiled, dragged across wood signalled that Thorgeir was opening the door. Arinbjorn went for his axe, only to feel Sigvaldi’s hand catch him. He turned sharply to his friend. Sigvaldi was staring at him, eyes wide and intense. Was it fear he saw? Why should he be afraid? They were in the right here.

The door opened slowly and Arinbjorn pried his arm from Sigvaldi’s grasp but did not reach for his weapon again. Before them stood Thorgeir, short yet muscular, topless with one arm behind his back. The late morning sun lit up his speckled hair, but no light seemed to pierce the two black eyes that narrowed upon seeing Arinbjorn.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“We were worried you may have been attacked.” He tried to keep his voice level. He could almost feel Sigvaldi’s stare burning into the back of his head encouraging him to remember that he promised not to act without further proof.

“Why would we have been attacked?”

“After burying the Skjalti family, we followed some suspicious tracks. They led us here. And to this.” Arinbjorn drove a hand into his tunic. He watched Thorgeir tense. Smiling inwardly, Arinbjorn pulled out the small piece of bloodied cloth they had found by the river. It was made of a thick wool and dyed dark blue. He held it before Thorgeir, hoping he wouldn’t notice the shake in his hands.

Tentatively, Thorgeir reached out and held the cloth. After a moment of resistance, Arinbjorn released it. Thorgeir held it in his hands for a moment, studying it in the low morning light.

“Do you know where it came from?” Sigvaldi asked.

“Why would I?”

“It was found on an ash tree in your field. Down by the river,” Sigvaldi provided.

Thorgeir turned the piece of cloth over. “This looks like it came from some form of cloak,” he offered. “Although it has intricate patterning.”

“We were hoping you would know whose cloak it came from.” This all came from Sigvaldi. Arinbjorn simply kept watching Thorgeir for his reactions. An eye of his was twitching, and he still had not revealed his other arm.

“I don’t have any blue cloaks.”

“What are you men talking about?” The female voice revealed itself to be an older woman. She emerged from behind Thorgeir, a long thin dagger in her hand. If only Jofrid had been given such time to prepare.

“Gudrid, these men think they tracked Skjalti’s killer to us,” Thorgeir said. “They found this.” He offered her the scrap of cloth.

“The killer made his escape down the river,” Sigvaldi said. “He emerged here.”

“We don’t know anything about that,” Thorgeir said, squaring up.

“This is *murder*.” Arinbjorn emphasised and made to move towards him. Before he could cross the threshold, Thorgeir whipped an axe out from behind him and held it up before Arinbjorn. The blade hung inches from his eyes.

“Be careful with your next words, son of Thorleikr.”

Arinbjorn felt Sigvaldi’s hand on his shoulder. It pulled him gently away from the blade.

“I will find this killer. Perhaps I have *already* found him.”

“How dare –.”

“Come to dinner tonight.” His wife’s suggestion caused Thorgeir to stop dead.

“What?” Arinbjorn spat.

Gudrid deftly placed herself between her husband and Arinbjorn.

“Gudrid, what are you –.”

“We truly do not know who this belongs to,” Gudrid said, cutting off Thorgeir and gesturing to the cloth. “But my husband will kill you if you slander him again.”

“Then why invite us to dinner?” Sigvaldi asked. He, too, was now positioning himself before Arinbjorn. Gently moving him aside.

“Because tonight we are hosting a feast for the local chieftains, including Hallr and his priest. One of them may know who this belongs to.” She looked pointedly at her husband. “He is the foster son of the murdered. He has a *right* to pursue the killer.”

“You’re inviting the Christians too?” Sigvaldi queried.

“We all have to live on his island,” Thorgeir said finally. He lowered his axe.

“Then why the roasted horse?” Arinbjorn asked. “I recognise the smell.”

“They are welcome to live here, they are our neighbours, but I’ll be damned if they take away my way of life,” Thorgeir said proudly.

“He likes to see them uncomfortable.”

Thorgeir shot his wife a look.

“But that doesn’t make him a murderer,” Gudrid said swiftly.

“No.” Arinbjorn said at last. Now the moment had passed, a bit of the energy had left him.

“We accept your offer,” Sigvaldi said, finally. He turned to look Arinbjorn dead in the eyes.

“We will return in the evening.”

Arinbjorn nodded.

“Good. Now, leave us to prepare for the night.”

“Bring better manners later.” Thorgeir crossed his arms.

“We will, thank you.”

Sigvaldi took Arinbjorn by the shoulders and guided him away from the Lawspeaker’s farm.

*

The walk back to his father’s home was quiet. Arinbjorn had no words for Sigvaldi. Instead, he simply kept his gaze ahead, studying the landscape leading out from Thorgeir’s hall. The low, undulating hills glistened in the sun. The sound of their boots pushing through the ice filled the silence between them. Thorgeir’s family had been one of the first to arrive in Iceland. His great grandfather built their farm close to the Ljósavatn lake, far to the northeast of Iceland. Upon becoming Lawspeaker, however, Thorgeir had relocated to the Thingvellir valley so that he could be close to the Law Rock. This new hall was built close to the Ölfusá river, providing a shipping route all the way to the sea; during the spring and summer the land was rich and fertile, but with a few more weeks of winter left to go the earth was white all over.

After a while, Arinbjorn spotted what he was looking for. A rocky outcropping that jutted out of the hills like iron teeth. It was a vantage point that overlooked the entire river basin of the Ölfusá. Deviating from his route home, Arinbjorn began to climb the black rock.

“What are you doing?” Sigvaldi asked. “We haven’t gotten long before we will need to return to your farm and change for tonight.”

“We can be late.” Arinbjorn continued to climb.

Sigvaldi let out an audible sigh and joined him in climbing the rock face. It was slick with ice but Arinbjorn managed to find his way to the top with little difficulty. Aside from a few curses from Sigvaldi who kept losing his footing, the climb was uneventful.

“Why are we here?” Sigvaldi’s question came through his panting and heaving. He lay on his back on the top of the rock, eyes closed.

“I can see everything from here. Skjalti’s farm, the river, Thorgeir’s hall.” He pointed them out as he said them. “The Ölfusá goes straight into the sea, and past many farmsteads. So why did the killer get out at Thorgeir’s?”

“He was running in water at night. His feet would have frozen if he stayed too long.”

“I know. But the Lawspeaker’s farm? Considering the butcher wants to hide, it’s a dangerous place to emerge.”

“Accusing him was stupid. Even if he is the killer. If you are wrong, you could get killed for slander.”

“Unlike this murderer I respect the laws and traditions. I will not hide from my intent.”

“A little more subtly might help.” Taking his gaze away from the river, Arinbjorn found Sigvaldi smiling.

“I was being subtle.” Despite himself, Arinbjorn laughed. Sigvaldi joined him. “Alright, I will try.”

“Come on, if you want to talk to these people we had better move.”

Sigvaldi began his descent but Arinbjorn stayed a moment longer, casting his gaze out over the farmsteads below. He knew he had been foolish to accuse the Lawspeaker so brazenly. If he and Sigvaldi were to survive their dinner with the chieftains tonight, he would have to learn to hold his tongue.

Chapter Six

The wind and rain hurled themselves against the hull of the *Ormrinn Langi*. The great *skeid* lurching violently against the relentless battering. The storm had formed quickly; a dark sky, purple and bloated, greeted them as they left the relative safety of the fjords. Thorer had wanted to turn back, but Olaf overrode him citing cowardice on his captain's part. Now, as Olaf watched the boatswain get swept off the deck and fall into the black waters, he regretted his decision.

He watched as the young man fought against the writhing waves, his head surfacing briefly before being smothered by the next blanket of water. He cries for help drowned out by the storm.

"Man overboard!" Olaf shouted, his voice disappearing in the wind.

"No time!" Thorer shouted back. He was at the tiller, bent over and straining to keep the ship on an even course. "More drums!"

The drummers, who had lashed themselves to the deck, began beating their drums with more intensity. The rowers in turn heaved their great oars to the new rhythm. Olaf watched as dozens of oars rose in unison before diving into the roiling waters. The ship pressed on into the storm, and the boatswain's figure disappeared behind them. His screams silenced moments later.

"My king, stay back from the edge!" Thorer's cry brought Olaf back to the moment. He released his grip and unsteadily made his way over to the captain.

"You were right, Thorer. This was madness."

"I'd much rather have been wrong, my king." Thorer wore a manic grin, but he maintained his gaze on the sea ahead. "I think I see the storm clearing."

Olaf turned to look out across the bow, all he could see was purple cloud and an endless black sea.

"I see nothing."

"Go below," this came out quietly, almost resignedly.

Olaf nodded slowly and left Thorer at the tiller. Just as he was about to reach the stairs below, a squall caught the sails and the ship lurching violently to starboard. Olaf lost his footing and fell head

first down the stairs into the hold. He managed to slow his descent by grabbing onto the rails, but they were slick with water. His head struck the floor, and white-hot light filled his vision.

*

The rain lashed at Thorer's face, blurring his vision. His skin felt raw and swollen as he stared down the maelstrom. The wind was deafening; he could barely make out the drums behind him, nor the cries of his men as they gave all their strength to the oars. Focusing on the horizon, he desperately fought to keep the ship angled into the waves. He watched as the waters rose up to starboard, a blanket of ink that reached up to the sky before crashing down onto the deck.

“Brace!”

The water careened across the deck, and Thorer felt the whole ship tip to port. The shouts of his men filled the air. With all of his strength he fought the tiller, his muscles screaming for him to stop. His left arm tore under the strain. He cried out.

Eventually, mercifully, the ship righted and Thorer could ease off the tiller. If this continued they would lose the ship.

“The king is dead!” The cry cut through the wind like a bell.

Thorer tore his gaze from the bow to see who was shouting. He saw an older man, lean and haggard, climbing out from the hold. His eyes were wide with shock and his cries revealed few yellowed teeth.

“He has angered Aegir and killed us all!”

“Restrain him!” Thorer shouted. Two oarsmen, young and able-bodied, leapt from their bench and tackled the hysterical sailor. “Leif! Take the helm!” Thorer released the tiller to young Leif, his first mate, and made his way over to the sailor. He grabbed him by his sodden tunic and shouted.

“Where is the king?”

“With Hel!”

Frustrated, Thorer threw the sailor back to the deck and made his way to look into the hold. The deck was slippery, and he lost his footing a couple of times as the ship continued to rock

violently. Looking back to the tiller, Leif appeared to be handling the navigation well, a grim look fixed upon his aquiline face.

Finally, Thorer made his way to the hold stairs and looked down below. There, in the darkness surrounded by a dark stain, lay Olaf.

“No.” It came out a whisper.

Holding on to the rails, Thorer rapidly took the stairs and landed at his king’s side. Olaf lay face down in a pool of seawater and blood. Gently, Thorer turned him over. A low moan escaped Olaf.

“He is alive!” Thorer shouted. He looked above and called for men to join him.

Holding his king’s head in his lap, Thorer began to examine him. The blood was coming from a head wound.

A moment later, several oarsmen had surrounded them both. Looking about he did not recognise any of them, save an older sailor, called Illugi.

“Illugi, help me get him to his bed. And find me someone who can heal.”

“We left the healers clinging to that rocky sker.” Illugi knelt and helped raise Olaf from the floor. The pair made their way quickly to Olaf’s cabin.

“What about that Icelander we have in the cell?”

“The hostage?”

“Bring him to me.” Thorer did not have the time to argue.

“What if he won’t help?”

“If Olaf dies, he dies.”

*

It was pain that brought him back to consciousness. A dull ache that seemed to reverberate around his entire skull and spread out to his body. It was cold. He could feel his clothes were sodden; they clung to him like a second skin. Tentatively, he opened his eyes. The world gradually came into focus and he realised he was on his bed. A low light from a couple of lanterns cast his cabin in a yellow pallor.

He winced as a stabbing pain pierced his eyes. Gradually the pain receded as he acclimatised to the low light.

He thought back to the last thing he remembered, the fall into the hold, and raised his hand to his head. He felt a tourniquet had been wrapped tightly around him. Pulling his hand back he saw it was wet with both water and blood.

“Ah, you’re alive. That’s good for me I imagine.”

Sitting up, Olaf looked for the source of the voice. He found it. Towards the back of the cabin, in a darkened corner, a small man sat in a chair. He was old, with white straggly hair that framed a weathered and tan face. He was slight, his clothes hung loosely on him, with thin bony hands that lay interlaced on his lap. Olaf recognised him immediately.

“Einar Geirleifsson.”

“My King.” Even in his weakened state, the sarcasm was unmistakable to Olaf.

“Where is Thorer?” He tried to get out of bed but pain from his head shot through his body and he eased back down.

“I wouldn’t move too much if I were you. I’ve seen men die from head wounds such as that, days after the fact.”

“Why are you here?”

“It turns out in your haste to kill all those witches you also killed anyone who may have been able to help you. They unfettered me to heal you. Under pain of death, of course.”

Olaf sighed, “Of course.”

“I will alert Captain Thorer to your recovery.”

Olaf watched as Einar rose from his seat, joined by the clashing of chains, and made his way to a little bell that lay on a side table. With a smile that did not reach his eyes, Einar rung the bell.

Olaf winced.

Moments later, the door to the cabin burst open and Thorer Klakka came bounding into the room. His heavy, muscular, form barged past Einar, throwing himself to his knees at the side of the bed.

“My king, you live!” The genuine joy in his voice was in sharp contrast to Einar’s.

“Thanks to you.” Then, after a moment, “and Einar.”

Thorer looked over to a theatrically bowing Einar. “I’m sorry I used him, but I could think of no other way.”

Olaf reached out and squeezed his friend’s arm. “You did well. Thank you.” Thorer smiled warmly. “What news of the storm?”

“We have passed through the worst of it.”

“Why don’t you tell him how the storm ended?” Einar said.

Thorer’s smile faltered and he returned his gaze to Einar. “Get him out of here. He lives for now.”

Two men came and escorted Einar out of the room, hoisting him off the floor and dragging him away.

“What did he mean by that?”

“Nothing, my king.”

“Thorer, you are a great captain. But a terrible liar.” He stared at Thorer. He watched him swallow and spend time considering his answer.

“The storm was heavy and I saw no way out of it. I sent you down below to keep you safe for as long as I could.”

Olaf nodded, he suspected as much. “But we made it through.”

“Yes.”

“Then, what happened?”

Thorer rose from his kneeling position and looked away from Olaf. His great shoulders were tense.

“One of the men found you down in the hold. Barely breathing and blood pouring from your head. He thought you were dead. He came out screaming about your hubris in defying the old gods, and how it had killed us all.”

“Go on.”

“I ordered him restrained whilst I left to come help you. I summoned Einar.” Thorer was visibly shaking now. “As I watched Einar tend to you, the storm seemed to abate. As if from nowhere Leif found a route through the waves and managed to escape the worst of it.”

“What is wrong with that?”

“It is Einar. He prayed to the old gods the whole time he was treating you. Praying for your recovery. Praying for the storm to end. Several of the men had gathered to pay their respects. They all saw it.”

“He defies me even as he heals me.” Anger began to replace confusion. Olaf rose from his bed, resisting the pain in his head.

“He saved your life. And the storm abated.” Thorer returned his gaze to Olaf.

“Don’t tell me you believe him?” Venom filled his voice.

“I am just relieved you are alive.” Olaf could hear the vulnerability in his friend. It calmed him. A little.

“Old friend, it is only by the grace of God we live.” After a moment’s thought he continued, “Einar’s son is in the hold too, is he not?”

Tentatively, Thorer responded. “Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Bring him and Einar to the deck at once. Let us see whose gods are greater.”

*

The sense of calm that had fallen over the sea was matched only by the rising disquiet onboard the *Ormrinn Langi*. Olaf stepped out of the hold and into the late afternoon. The dark bloated sky from before had passed, leaving only grey clouds that hung high above. The sun was setting. Streams of golden rays burst through the breaks in the cloud and lit up the sea. The ship rocked listlessly in the waters, the creak and moans of the wood palpable in the relative silence.

Some members of the crew were using buckets to empty the ship of water that had been taken on during the storm. The air smelled of salt and vomit; clearly someone had been sick during the storm. More than one someone.

As he emerged from the hold, all activity on the deck paused for a moment. The oarsmen and drummers looked up at him, a mixture of relief and fear on their faces. They knew what was to happen. Thorer was behind him, along with Einar and his son. Four guards flanked them.

Olaf made a show of walking slowly across the deck until he made it to the edge of the ship. He leant over and looked down into the water. He spat.

“I am alive.” No one spoke. “I was saved by this man.” He gestured to Einar, whose brown eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I was promised that if I saved you I would be spared,” Einar said.

“You were.”

“Then why are we here?”

Raising his voice so that all could hear him, Olaf faced down his crew. “He claims the old gods saved me and quieted the storm.” The sailors all shifted uncomfortably.

“What does it matter what I believe? You are alive.”

“It matters because you are wrong. And I will prove it.”

“How?”

Olaf smiled. “Bring him to me.”

Einar went to protest but found no one was grabbing him. Instead he watched his son, Afli, get taken before the king.

“Father!” Afli cried.

“Leave him!” Einar attempted to break free. Swiftly, a guard struck him about the head and sent him to his knees. He was dragged back and restrained.

Two of the guards brought the young boy before Olaf, restraining him. Olaf grabbed Afli’s chin and inspected the young runt. He couldn’t have been more than ten years old, but he was tall for his age and handsome. He wriggled and squirmed beneath his touch. He reminded Olaf of the eels he would catch as a young man.

“If his gods had any power,” Olaf’s voice was now the louder than the sea, “why would they save me? I am their enemy. No, it is only the one true God who has any power in this world. It was He who saved us.”

“We came willingly to your hall, we did you no wrong!” Einar was screaming, he struggled against his captors. “Let him go!”

“Your people refuse to accept God into their hearts; until they do, you are mine to do with as I please.” Olaf pulled out a dagger from his belt. It was short and mostly used for carving, but it would do.

“I curse you!”

“You have no power here.” Olaf smiled. “But maybe, if your gods are real, they will save your son.” With that, Olaf drove his blade into the young boy’s stomach. He felt the blade pierce the flesh and plunge deep into his bowels. The boy’s scream was stifled by the guard holding his mouth. Olaf drew the blade slowly across the gut, opening a wound from which the entrails came pouring out. Red hot blood gushed forth and covered his hands. Einar screamed.

Olaf looked up at the guards holding the boy and gestured overboard. Nodding, they hoisted his still wriggling form up and threw him into the waters. A moment later there was a small splash.

Einar threw back his head and screamed a wordless howl. The sailors looked on.

“I guess not,” Olaf said. Wiping his blade on tunic, he shouted, “let this be a reminder to you all: There is no god but ours, and He gives no quarter.” He finished there and addressed Thorer directly. “Captain?”

Thorer’s face was ashen. He was staring at the pool of blood and organs on the floor. Eventually, he turned his gaze to Olaf’s.

“Yes, my king?”

“Clean up this mess.”

With that, Olaf left his crew and made his way to the bow of the ship. He wondered if he could see Iceland yet.